

A PHILOSOPHICAL EXPOSITION OF THE ILLUSIVENESS OF THE SELF IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract

The question "who am I?" or "what is the nature of my being?" seeks to unravel what constitutes one's identity, values, purpose and place in the world. So, the idea of the self presupposes a persons' understanding and perception of who they are in terms of their thoughts, feelings, actions and unique attributes. Today, our constant interaction with digital platforms increasingly shapes our perception and interaction with others leading to what this paper sees as the "illusion of the self". Against this backdrop, the paper critically exposes the illusion of the self in the digital age. It argues that this illusion arises as we curate and present ourselves online, often selectively highlighting certain aspects of our identities and masking others. This creates a fragmented self that disconnects between the digital self and the real self which ultimately results in the blurring of boundaries between reality and virtuality. In addition, the paper shows that the constant feedback loop of likes, comments, and shares can further reinforce this illusion, leading individuals to prioritize online validation and external perceptions over their authentic selves. In order to avoid this fragmented self, the paper advocates for the cultivation of the culture of self-reflection and critical thinking in the consumption of online platforms in order to maintain a healthy sense of self-authenticity.

Key Words: Self, Digital Age, Digital Self, Fragmented Self, Self-reflection and Critical Thinking.

Introduction

The “problem of the self” explores the complexities of what constitute the self; encompassing questions of continuity, discontinuity, and the nature of consciousness over time. It delves into whether the self is a unified entity or a collection of experiences and processes. Philosophically, it grapples with issues like whether the self is an illusion, a product of habits and desires, or a fundamental aspect of existence. For this reason, philosophers have argued that the development of authentic self is the central lifelong project for each of us. In view of this, Thoreau asked “If I am not I, who will be?” “In the same vein, Kierkegaard declared: “From becoming an individual no one, no one at all, is excluded, except he who excludes himself by becoming a crowd.” This means that the search for meaning is the search for expression of one’s real self. So, what does it mean to be a “self”? “Are we born with a self, or is it developed?” Is it one thing, or many? In fact, “how much of me is me?”, Is the self-something that we can know and understand? What actually constitute the self? Is the self reduceable to our physical existence, a collection of memories, habits, and desires or is there something more fundamental that transcends these aspects? How do we differentiate between ourselves and others? These questions form the central concerns of the problem of the self in philosophy.

However, the digitalization in today’s world is redefining our understanding of the self as it has been significantly impacted by the rise of technology, particularly the internet and social media. This has led to the emergence of a “digital self,” which is an online identity distinct from or intertwined with one’s real-world self. The digital self is shaped by online activities, social media profiles, the data trails of online interactions as well as AI-powered tools that enables the individual users to create and manipulate digital representations of themselves in newly profound ways. This paper therefore critically exposes the illusiveness of the self in the digital

age highlighting the debilitating impact of digital platforms on our conceptualization of the self and possible ways of mitigating this challenge. In a bid to achieve its objectives the paper clarifies the idea of the self through the purview of some perspectives on the nature of the self. It highlights the meaning and characteristics of digital age and also outlines some digital platforms.

The Nature of the Self

Etymologically, the word “self” is derived from the Dutch *Zelf* and German *Selbe* which express an emphatic sense of “I” myself. In this sense, the self refers to ego, subject, I, me as opposed to the object or the totality of objects; may be distinguished from “not me”. According to the *Dictionary of Philosophy* the self is “the quality of uniqueness and persistence through changes, by virtue of which a person may call himself I and leading to the distinction among selves, as implied in each word as myself, yourself, himself. It refers to the uniqueness of anything, as in ‘itself’ (288)

The self is an individual person as the object of his or her reflective consciousness. This reference is necessarily subjective. Thus, the self is a reference by a subject to the same subject. The self is therefore distinguishable from “others”. It is a person’s sense of identity, distinct from others, encompassing their thoughts, feelings, actions and overall perception of who they are. The self is also seen as the source of consciousness; the agent responsible for an individual’s thoughts and actions or the substantial nature of a person which endures and unifies consciousness over time.

Philosophical Perspectives on the Nature of the Self

The first major perspective on the nature of the self is the Socratic-Platonic idea that the immortal soul is synonymous to the self. In his analysis of human nature, Plato sees man as a dualistic being composed of the body and the soul. On the one hand, the body is a material substance that is nothing but a temporal vessel for the soul in its earthly sojourn. On the other hand, the soul is the essence of

the self, immortal, pre-exists the body and ultimately seeks truth and knowledge. In Plato's *Phaedo*, as quoted by John Chaffee, Socrates elaborates this dualistic description of man as follows:

when the soul and the body are united, then nature orders the soul to rule and govern, and the body to obey and serve... the soul is in the very likeness of the divine, and immortal, and intellectual, and uniform, and indissoluble, and unchangeable; and that the body is in the very likeness of the human, and mortal, and unintellectual, and multiform, and indissoluble and changeable. (93-94).

This quote underscores the superiority of the soul over the body and establishes same as the essential element of the human person. For this reason, Plato equates the soul with the self as the essential nature of man as it is seen as "the seat of human consciousness". (Ishaya, 122). To drive home this point, he describes the soul as being composed of three parts namely:

- i. Rational (*Logistikon*): This represents our divine essence that enables us to think deeply, make wise choices and achieve a true understanding of eternal truths.
- ii. Spirited (*Thymoeides*): This represents honor, ambition, and emotions. Its major task is to support reason.
- iii. Appetitive (*Epithymetikon*): This represents our basic biological needs such as hunger, bodily needs and sexual desires.

From the above classification of the soul, Plato points out that there exists a dynamic relationship among the three parts such that they sometimes work in concert or in bitter conflict. Plato believes that

when conflicts occur it is the responsibility of our reason to sort things out and exert control, re-establishing a harmonious relationship between the three elements of ourselves. For this reason, Plato attributes the rational part of the soul with the true self since it is the coordinating element of our being. However, the major problem with of this conception of the self lies in its impracticality in explaining the physical world, and its neglect of the body's influence on the identity of the self and behaviour.

The second major philosophical perspective on the nature of the self is the Cartesian notion of the self as a thinking thing. This is derived from Rene Descartes famous self-reflective assertion "I think, therefore I am" (*cogito, ergo sum*). The "I" which is the self is a thinking, immaterial substance (mind/soul) distinct from the body, whose essence is consciousness. In his radical mind-body dualism, Descartes sees the self as fundamentally a non-physical "thinking thing" that knows its own existence with certainty, even while doubting the external world and its own physical form, creating a subjective inner-focused self. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, as quoted by Chaffee, Descartes outlines the notion of the self as a thinking thing as follows:

Although, I certainly do possess a body with which I am very closely conjoined; nevertheless, because, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in as far as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and as, on the other hand, I possess a distinct idea of body, in as far as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that I, [that is, my mind, by which I am what I am], is entirely and truly distinct from my body and may exist without it. (Chaffee 106).

In the above quote, Descartes famously asserts the primacy of consciousness in defining the core of the self. In a nutshell, to be conscious of the self; is to be aware of the self. However, critics have pointed out that the problem with this Cartesian notion of the self is based on how the immaterial self, interacts with the physical body and the external world leading to issues like solipsism, that is, the claim that only the self is certain to exist.

The third major philosophical perspective of the nature of the self is the Lockean notion of the self as continuous consciousness and memory built through experience. According to Locke, it is always in relation to our present sensations and perceptions that everyone is to himself that which he calls self. In his words, as quoted by Chaffee:

For as far as any intelligent being can repeat the idea of any past action with the same consciousness, it has of it as first, and with the same consciousness it has of any present action; so far as it is the same personal self. For it is by the consciousness it has of its present thoughts and actions, that it is self to itself now. (112).

In Locke's view, conscious awareness and memory of previous experiences are the keys to understanding the self. In other words, you have a coherent concept of yourself as a distinct self because you are aware of your self when you are thinking, feeling, and willing. Also, you have a memory of times when you were aware of yourself in the past; in other situations. However, the problem with the Lockean notion of the self is the fact that there are many moments when we are not consciously aware of our self, that is, when we are simply unreflectively existing e.g. being in a state of dreaming. Furthermore, there are many past experiences that we

have forgotten or have faulty recollections of. Thus, during these lapses, when we are not aware of our self nor remember being aware of our self, we cannot be sure if we were the same person, the same substance, the same soul.

It is important to note at this juncture that due to the constraint of space the paper only reviews the above philosophical perspectives as representatives of several views on the nature of the self. However, philosophers like William James, Thomas Aquinas, David Hume, Immanuel Kant, Gilbert Ryle have offered different perspectives on the nature of the self, ranging from the empirical self, the self as a unified entity or a psychological continuity, the self as a bundle or collection of different perceptions, the self as a constructed entity, to the self as how we behave. In essence, the nature of the self is an obscure complex and multifaceted topic that continues to be explored and debated across various theoretical frameworks in philosophy and other related disciplines. This debate becomes more complicated and problematic as the sense of the self is continually being influenced by the virtuality of existence in this digital age. Virtuality of existence as used here refers to the quality of existing in a non-physical, computer-generated realm. It is a simulated interaction devoid of real-world experience.

What is Digital Age?

The expression “Digital Age” describes the current period marked by the extensive utilization and incorporation of digital technologies in human affairs. The digital age, also known as the information age or the computer age, refers to the current era characterized by the rapid advancement and integration of digital technologies, impacting various aspects of human society and economy. It is defined by the ability to easily and rapidly transmit and access information, as well as the increasing importance of data and digital communication. This is made possible through various digital platforms.

Characteristics of Digital Age

1. **Widespread Use of Digital Technology:** Computers, Smartphones, and other digital devices are common place.
2. **Easy Access to Information:** The internet provides a vast amount of information at our finger tips.
3. **Rapid Information Sharing:** Digital technologies facilitate instant communication and information exchange.
4. **Digital Transformation:** Many aspects of life and business are being transformed by digital technologies.
5. **Economic Impact:** The digital Age has created new industries and business models.
6. **Social Impact:** Digital Technologies have reshaped social interactions and communication.

What are Digital Platforms?

Digital platforms are online systems that facilitate interactions and transactions between users. It refers to a web-based structural software package that speed and eases the communication and transactions between and among users. They can be classified as follows:

1. Social Media Platforms:

a. Faebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tiktok

These platforms connect individuals and organizations, enabling communication, sharing of information, and building communities.

b. You Tube

This is a platform for video sharing, content creation, and entertainment.

2. E-commerce Platforms

a. Amason, eBay, Etsy

These platforms facilitate online shopping, connecting buyers with sellers.

b. Shopify

This is a platform that helps businesses create and manage their online stores.

3. Cloud Computing Platforms

a. Google Cloud, AWS (Amazon Web Services), Microsoft Azure

These platforms provide on-demand access to computing resources, storage, and other services.

b. Digital Ocean

This is a cloud hosting platform that provides virtual machines and other infrastructure services.

4. Communication and Collaboration Tools

a. Zoom, Google Meet

These are video conferencing platforms for remote meetings and collaborations.

b. Slack, Microsoft Teams

These are messaging and collaboration platforms for teams and organizations

c. Google Workspace, Microsoft 365

These are suites of online productivity tools including email, document editing, and project management.

5. Digital Marketing Platforms

a. Google Ads, Facebook Ads

These are platforms for online advertising, allowing businesses to reach targeted audiences.

b. Buffer, Spout Social

These are social media management platforms for scheduling posts, managing engagements, and analyzing performance.

c. Marketing CloudFx

This is a platform that centralizes digital marketing features, including search engine rankings, email campaigns, and lead tracking.

The Digital Age and It's Influence on the Self

In the digital age, our sense of self is increasingly shaped by our online personas and experiences, leading to the phenomenon of the “illusion of the self.” This refers to the idea that our sense of self is not a fixed, continuous entity but rather a fragmented and evolving construct, shaped by our interactions with digital technologies and the online world. This is due to the multiplicity of digital personas we create and the ways in which technology influences our perception of self, others, and reality. This illusion arises as we curate and present ourselves online, often selectively highlighting certain aspects of our identities and masking others. In this sense, we unconsciously bifurcate ourselves into two namely: the real self (the masked self) and the digital self (the numerous identities created and visible online). The constant feedback loop of likes, comments, and shares constantly reinforce this illusion, leading individuals to prioritize online validation and external perceptions over their authentic selves. The profound impacts of the digital age on our sense of self includes but not limited to the followings:

1. Multiple Personas and the Fragmented Self

The digital world allows us to create and maintain multiple online personas or identities, each tailored to different platforms and audiences. This leads to dishonesty in personality as we hide behind our digital mask to present to the world what we are not but want the world to see us as. This fragmentation of the self can blur the lines between our real-world identity and our digital self, potentially leading to a situation of being “disconnected” from our authentic self. In other words, the digital realm leads us to bifurcate the “I” (our inner self) from the “Me” (our public self) which leads to a dissociation between our online self and our authentic self. This is because our online selves may not always align with our offline personas which consequently leads to a disoriented self. In effect, our online selves become curated representations, often prioritizing certain aspects of ourselves while downplaying others.

2. The Illusion of Being in Control

We exert considerable control over how we present ourselves online, which can create a sense of illusionary power and influence. This control can extend to our relationships, as we selectively share information and experiences with others, potentially leading to misunderstandings or misinterpretations. The digital world can also magnify the feeling of being judged or observed, leading to a heightened sense of self-consciousness and anxiety.

3. The Pursuit of Validation or Narcissistic Tendencies

The digital age has fostered a culture of instant gratification and validation through likes, comments, and shares. This can lead individuals to prioritize online engagement over genuine connections and real-world experiences. The fear of being overlooked or unappreciated in the digital of self, as individuals strive to meet the expectations of others and gain external validation. This leads to the individual becoming fixated on their online image and external validation.

4. Evolving “Digital Self”

The digital age is fostering a new form of self, a “digitalized self,” distinct from the traditional sense of self. This “Digitalized Self” is shaped by our interactions with technology, our online identities, and the evolving digital environment.

5. Suspension of Concrete Social Relationships

The digital world can make it more difficult to form genuine connections and build meaningful relationships. Our online personas may differ significantly from our real-world selves, leading to a sense of disconnect or disappointment in personal interactions. The constant availability of online communication can also make it harder to be present in the moment and appreciate the richness of real-world experiences.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is clear that the digital age has profound impacts on our sense of self as we are gradually but steadily transiting from traditional sense of self to a digitalized self. This has resulted into a multiple sense of self and a fragmented identity to the extent that we unfortunately place more importance on our public self at the expense of our true self. The illusion of being in control which gives us a fleeting impression of power and influence that ends in a heightened self-consciousness and anxiety as well as the pursuit of validation and narcissistic tendencies. More importantly, our personal relationships have been severely affected as the electronic devices distract us from living in the moment. Real relationships require real conversation, real face to face engagement and real emotion. When we text, e-mail, voice note, Facebook, and the like, we lose a vital piece of relationships: the emotional connection. In view of these challenges this paper advocates for the cultivation of the culture of self-reflection and critical thinking about our engagement with digital platforms. Self-reflection on the hand is the process of thinking deeply about one's own thoughts, feelings, behaviours and motivations. It involves taking a step back to question with the aim of understanding why you act, think, and feel the way you do which ultimately leads to personal growth, self-awareness and purposeful decision making. Critical thinking on the other hand refers to the utilization of a variety of thinking tools or techniques, such as the formulation of logical arguments, detection of logical validity and fallacies, analysis of concepts, and exposure of hidden assumptions in a reflective process. The combination of these two principles enables us to critically examine our online identities and understand the impacts of our online presence on our sense of self. By so doing, we are better prepared to navigate the digital world more consciously, reflectively and responsibly thereby maintaining a healthy sense of authenticity. With this, we are placed on a vantage point to develop a mindful approach to digital consumption and

prioritize real-world connections and experience. This re-echoes the Socratic dictum that “the unexamined life is not worth living” So, as we engage in the usage of various digital platforms we need to be aware and conscious of the dangers of possible transformational effect on our sense of self from a unified traditional sense of self to a fragmented digitalized self. This empowers us to question and evaluate the state of the sense of self we are in within a moment. This serves as a checkmating mechanism to take control of developing and maintaining our sense of self and who we are without leaving it to a non-conscious illusive determining power of the digital platforms in today’s world. In a nutshell, a self-questioning self; is an authentic self!

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