

The Cloudy Self and the Evolution of Consciousness

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Every day we navigate through ever changing experiential and conceptual landscape. We invent narratives that will move us through this space in meaningful ways or destroy existing ones in favor of more sublime readings. The fully satisfying integration of this landscape into our self-image is yet to be found. In this paper, I propose a perspective that finds a new location for the center of gravity of the self vis a vis virtual worlds as exemplified by electronic media. It is a view that places the focus in the cloud of presence and agency that one inhabits rather than in a body. This approach organizes the new modes of experience and knowledge around a sense of the self that is capable of creating meaning.

First, I will establish the basis of my argument in phenomenological terms and introduce the location of the self as it originates from consciousness. Then, I will discuss a way to anchor the self within our experience by way of developing a concept of consciousness-producing organ and a strong subject understood as the acting self. I will follow with a description of the nebulous space inhabited by the subject to finally sketch out a couple of directions for future enquiry.

1. Phenomenological Continuity and the Location of the Self

The narratives giving structure and meaning to our world keep on developing and changing. With the popularization of ideas based on quantum theory, the experience of the World Wide Web, electronic devices and high-speed travel amongst others we find ourselves navigating a hybrid experiential territory. Despite the fact that this has been the case for a number of decades now, we are still yet to find an overarching narrative that would produce meaning on a human scale and incorporate all of our experiences into a coherent whole.

One way to resolve this cul de sac is to approach our knowledge and experience in terms of constitution of the self. Changing technology and understanding of the reality gives rise to new ways of engaging with the world. Human psyche is able to reconcile these experiences as long as the engagement is meaningful. This is not a new development. At the turn of the last century, Edmund Husserl describes his experience of shuttling between two experientially different worlds in the following passage:

“(...) the world in the ordinary sense of the word, is constantly there for me, so long as I live naturally and look in its direction. (...) And there is no need to modify these conclusions when I proceed to appropriate to myself the arithmetical world, and other ‘worlds’ (...) The natural world still remains ‘present,’ I am at the natural standpoint after as well as before, and in this respect undisturbed by the adoption of new standpoints.” (Husserl 19)

The actual experience of the self submerged in the different worlds remains for the author the same.

This possibility for meaningful continuity inspires me to discuss consciousness and formation of the self in phenomenological terms. In my experience, consciousness is produced in the process of contemplating the outside objects. The self is not a production of our body solely but arises from the interaction of the mind with the world of outside shapes. We describe ourselves in opposition to that, which we encounter.

The understanding of our capabilities, preferences, sense of belonging and limits form a constellation that we understand as the self. Additionally, when concentrating on the interior sense of the self, one will discover not a pure hum of the brain turning but an awareness of something other than one's mind. Jean-Paul Sartre illuminates this point as follows:

“Consciousness is consciousness of something. This means that transcendence is the constitutive structure of consciousness; that is, that consciousness is born supported by a being, which is not itself.” (Sartre 61)

Once we conceive of consciousness as a phenomenon that comes to be at the intersection of the outside and the inside, we can envision the self being produced by this consciousness at the same plane. The difference between the two experiential locations, and their mutual interaction, creates a subject conscious of itself.

This process is aided by technological advances enabling experience of the outside that is close to seamless with the sense of the self. The electronically enabled world, for example, reads very often as a mental space. Our experience of console platforms, computers and the Internet parallels the experience of our mind echoing its features such as imagination, memory, thoughts and logic. Understanding this world as formative to our self-image comes with minimal effort.

2. Organ versus Extension

The interpretation of media and technology as an extension of human faculty, which was popularized by Marshall McLuhan creates a conceptual stalemate. I believe that extension implies a reduction in intensity. The farther the extension reaches, the weaker the involvement of the initiating entity. Such an extension results in diluted self-representation. This state may even culminate in complete abandonment creating a schizophrenic situation, in which the extension is viewed as a separated fraction of the self or a parasite. Such an extension is unpredictable and disassociated. On the human level, it becomes difficult to invest it with gravity and meaning.

Such phenomena can be encountered, for example, on the Web in the culture of networking. If we conceive of social networking profiles as human extensions, it becomes easier to distance ourselves from them and deny taking full responsibility for our online interactions. What follows is a limit that we place on the intensity and meaningfulness of our relationships within this structure. It is easy to accept an invitation if it doesn't require any additional commitments. The result is a grouping of loosely related self-representations that remains vague in its meaning, unless doubled in the physical world.

It will take a shift in our perception of media and technology to create engaged relationships between us and what we currently perceive as our extensions. I believe, the entities, which we create on the web, for example, exist in meaningful way only when infused with our own life. It is a mistake to view them as an extension and as such they are redundant to our physical existence and more boring than real life. Conversely, if we claim the ownership of these entities and return them into our self-image, they will attain gravity and will sit more comfortably within our life. Conceptually shifting the weight of our self-image towards those entities will create more engaged relationships.

Thinking of software as an aid in production of additional human organ can facilitate this shift. This concept goes beyond understanding technology as an extension and presupposes it as an inherent human growth. I am constructing the idea of this organ by inferring its existence from its effect, which is the human capability for producing consciousness and the sense of self. Conceptualization of such an organ gives us a chance to anchor our self-image more firmly in the world of our choosing.

The location of that organ is uncertain precisely because it does not reside entirely in our physical body. We can infer however from the location of our consciousness that it comes into existence between our body and objects in the world. The consciousness-producing organ in recent decades gained another augmentation, software. In the virtual world, software provides us with the agency to develop consciousness into further manifestations and in this act it is incorporated as part of the organ.

3. The Strong Self and Its Organ

Establishing the reality of this consciousness-producing structure requires a strong subject, based in meaningful interactions. The nebulous constitution of the self is solidified in an acting subject, one that works across the physical body, objects in the world and virtual vehicles. In order to have a coherent experience of thus conceived self, the agency of the subject requires an individual entity as an origin.

This view stands in opposition to the concept of body without organs developed by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*. The authors conceptualized a body that is rid of subject and its interpretations. The body without organs is a body without the self. “The BwO,” they write, “is what remains when you take everything away. What you take away is precisely the phantasy, and significances and subjectifications as a whole.” (Deleuze & Guattari 151) The subject’s sense of wholeness and possibility for meaning are cast aside in favor of the decoded body and the formless, indiscriminating plane of consistency.

“The plane of consistency would be the totality of all BwO, a pure multiplicity of immanence, one piece of which may be Chinese, another American, another medieval, another petty perverse, but all in a movement of generalized deterritorialization in which each person takes and makes what she or he can, according to tastes she or he will have succeeded in abstracting from a Self, according to a politics or strategy successfully abstracted from a given formation,

according to a given procedure abstracted from its origins.” (Deleuze & Guattari 157)

In this act of equalization of former meanings the body reaches its capability to experience various intensities without blocking or directing them. This is the ground zero, a place of departure towards production of the real without the human subject.

This seepage of meaning can be observed in areas of culture, corporate and political endeavors and most immediately for a lot of us on line. It is realized in the culture of appropriation, remixing, casual groupings of objects and media assemblages with uncertain origins. This attitude also involves our self-image and modes in which we distribute our presence. It takes place on line, for example, through creation of various profiles that present multiple facets of a person as enumerations of text and visual media. These areas of our agency, when unattended to, become bizarrely foreign to us, and resemble a runaway organ. All the abandoned email accounts that fell out of use, their passwords forgotten, taunt our sense of wholeness from the virtual space.

Schizophrenia sets on when the originator disowns the manifestation of the self. Yet distribution and understanding of the self through different vehicles doesn't have to dilute us. We transcend our present selves in the physical world constantly in every act of perception and effectively succeed in creating the sense of self. The other mediums in this sense are no different. From experiential point of view, the virtual world allows additional opportunities for perception, which result in a similar self-affirmation.

4. The Cloudy Self and Conscious Evolution

Our experience is dictated not solely by what surrounds us physically. Electronic platforms running software provide the space for our senses, imagination, thoughts and intentions to play out. By having these experiences, we negotiate a space for our sense of self that transcends the physical world. In doing so, we become clouds of presence that span across different platforms and conceptual spaces. We can shift the weight of our consciousness to incorporate any given new territory within which we can act. In another words, the areas of our agency create the cloud.

On a basic level, we encounter and deal with different intensities and densities, which can be understood in terms of either larger coherent entities united by agency or relationships of units be they particles or electric charges. The above conception of intensities parallels Baudrillard's view of media in terms of intensity circuits that instead of carrying a message, transform all input into code. Intensity then is a charge rid of meaning. This unstable reality, viewed in terms of parts as opposed to entities, hunts our sense of self. The final reality is located not at some ever-elusive frontier, which is being removed farther with every degree of resolution. Instead, it is a nebulous reality constructed through consciousness and the self in the middle of all that we are able to perceive and act upon.

If Deleuze sought to rid the body of organs, I would like to expand the body to include additional ones. Software is the main means for humans to exercise their agency on a

console, machine or online. In the virtual space, software contributes to the consciousness-producing organ, described previously, by way of verifying the self through actions. We can gain access to working on our consciousness directly via software if our body image expands to include this organ.

If our self exists somewhere on the intersection of the body and the worlds we perceive, be they virtual or physical, then manipulation of those worlds will affect the conscious self. In this sense, by manipulating software, we have direct access to development of our consciousness. Humans have been evolving for hundreds of thousands of years. For the first time, we are conscious of and able to shape our own evolution.

5. Ideas for Further Production

This realization carries consequences for artist, programmers, cultural producers, and a whole array of media creators. The challenge is to organize and process the new capabilities and concepts in ways meaningful to humans and to integrate the expanded experience into our self-image. We cannot disown our reflection and cut it loose in the cyberspace or a conceptual space for that matter. Instead, we can place ourselves in the middle of the cloud formed by our agency and own it as we own our bodies.

Another area of inquiry is the subject's permeability. The question is how to make meaning and embed the subject in a world of horizontal information distribution without disrupting the free flow of stuff. This requires reinvention and creation of the self that is porous enough to let the information circulate and strongly defined so it communicates presence and agency.

Some artists have already jump-started the process. Nine Inch Nails for example makes a large number of their media available through their website. The latest full-length album *the slip* is available as a free download complete with multitracks. The visitors are encouraged to remix the songs and upload them to the site so others can listen and comment. This generous opening up does not however in any way diminish or dilute the essence of the main entity – Nine Inch Nails.

Additionally, being aware of our technology, as a force that in tandem with the body creates our consciousness, is to understand that one can work directly on the consciousness itself and purposefully shape its development. Finally, meaning is created around a strong subject that can relate to and negotiate its existence with other entities be they physical, virtual or conceptual. How we establish such strong subjects is a fertile ground for exploration.

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