

## THE SELF: DEATH BY TECHNOLOGY

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*Kenneth Gergen asks whether in the midst of a techno-cultural revolution the traditional conceptions of self and community continue to secure a morally viable society. Gergen examines the erosion of both individualism and communalism (and their associated institutions) by the accumulating “technologies of sociation,” the host of relatively low-cost technologies that dramatically expand and intensify social connection. He considers the effects of these technologies on the experience of a private self and argues that cumulatively they undermine the presumption of the individual as the locus of moral agency.*

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DRAWING FROM EARLY GREEK, Judaic, and Christian traditions, and particularly from the Enlightenment, we have typically viewed the single individual as the atom of the moral society. Whether we speak in terms of psyche, soul, agency, rational deliberation, or conscious choice, we generally hold that moral action is derived from particular conditions of the individual mind. Thus, philosophers seek to establish essential criteria for moral decision making, religious institutions are concerned with states of individual conscience, courts of law inquire into the individual's capacity to know right from wrong, and parents are concerned with the moral education of their young. The general presumption is that the virtuous mind propels meritorious conduct, and that with sufficient numbers of individuals performing worthy acts, we achieve the good society.

Yet, as Walter Ong's exploration of oral as opposed to literate or print societies suggests, our conception of individual minds is vitally dependent on the technological ethos.<sup>1</sup> The shift from an oral to a print culture, Ong proposes, significantly alters the common forms of thought. Thus, for example, in oral societies people are more likely to depend on recall, concrete as opposed to abstract categories, and redundancy as opposed to precision. Yet, there is an important sense in which this fascinating thesis is insufficiently realized. While Ong wishes to locate forms of mental life within a cultural context, he has no access into mental conditions themselves. That is, the analysis may be viewed as a treatise not on mental conditions but on cultural constructions of the mind. It is not thought in itself that changed but our way of defining what it is to think.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London: Methuen, 1982).

<sup>2</sup> Such a conclusion would also be congenial with a rapidly growing body of literature on the historical and cultural construction of the mind. See, for example, Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon, 1978); Catherine Lutz, *Unnatural Emotions: Everyday Sentiments on a Micronesian Atoll and Their Challenge to Western Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988); Carl F. Graumann and Kenneth J. Gergen, eds., *Historical Dimensions of Psychological Discourse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

To extend the implications of Ong's analysis, we may ask whether the conception of the mind as a critical focus of study—something we must know about—was not solidified by the expansion of printed media. In an oral society, where the determination of the real and the good grows from face-to-face negotiation, there is little reason to launch inquiry into the speaker's private meaning. Through words, facial expressions, gestures, physical context, and the constant adjustments to audience expression, meanings are made transparent. However, when print allows words to spring from the face-to-face relationship—when the discourse is insinuated into myriad contexts separated in time and space from its origins—then the hermeneutic problem becomes focal. To wonder and speculate about “the mind behind the words” is to create the reality of this mind. To grant this mental condition the status of originary source of action is to solidify its importance. Both hermeneutic study and psychological science have since assured the reality of a meaning/full mind with moral intent.

Given the potential dependency of conceptions of self on technological conditions, let us consider our contemporary ethos. In particular, what is to be said about the increasing insinuation of the technologies of sociation into our lives and its effects on our beliefs in individual minds? In my view the transformation of the technological ethos slowly undermines the intelligibility of the individual self as an originary source of moral action. The reasons are many and cumulative; I limit discussion here to several concatenating tendencies.<sup>3</sup>

*Polyvocality.* The dramatic expansion of the range of information to which we are exposed, the range of persons with whom we have significant interchange, and the range of opinions available within multiple media sites make us privy to multiple realities. Or, more

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<sup>3</sup> For a more extended analysis of the “loss of self” in the media age, see Sherry Turkle, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); and Kenneth J. Gergen, “Technology and the Self: From the Essential to the Sublime,” *Constructing the Self in a Mediated Age*, ed. Debora Grodin and Thomas R. Lindlof (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1996) 127-140.

simply, the comfort of parochial univocality is disturbed. Having become privy to multiple realities, we do not know where to limit ourselves. From the spheres of national politics and economics to local concerns with education, environment, or mental health, we are confronted with a plethora of conflicting information and opinion. And so it is with matters of moral consequence. Whether it is a matter of Supreme Court nominees, abortion policies, or affirmative action, for example, one is deluged with conflicting moral standpoints. To the extent that these standpoints are intelligible, they enter the compendium of resources available for the individual's own deliberations. In a Bakhtinian vein, the individual approaches a state of radical polyvocality.

If one does acquire an increasingly diverse vocabulary of deliberation, how is a satisfactory decision to be reached? The inward examination of consciousness yields not coherence but cacophony; there is not a "still small voice of conscience" but a chorus of competing contenders. It is one's moral duty to pay taxes, for example, but also to provide for one's dependents, to keep for oneself the rewards of one's labor, and to withhold monies from unjust governmental policies; it is one's moral duty to give aid to starving Africans, but also to help the poor of one's own country, and to avoid meddling in the politics of otherwise sovereign nations. Where in the mix of myriad moralities is the signal of certitude?

If immersion in a panoply of intelligibilities leaves one's moral resources in a state of complex fragmentation, then to what degree are these resources guiding or directing? Or more cogently for the present analysis, if "inward looking" becomes increasingly less useful for matters of moral action, does the concern with "my state of mind" not lose its urgency? The more compelling option for the individual is to turn outward to his or her social context—to detect the ambient opinion, to negotiate, compromise, and improvise. And in this move from the private interior to the social sphere, the presumption of a private self as a source of moral direction is subverted. As negotiating the complexities of multiplicity becomes normalized, the conception of the mind as a moral touchstone grows stale.

*Plasticity.* As the technologies of sociation increase our immersion in information and evaluation, they also expand the scope and complexity of our activities. We engage in a greater range of relationships distributed over numerous and variegated sites, from the face-to-face encounters in the neighborhood and workplace, to professional and recreational relationships that often span continents. Further, because of the rapid movement of information and opinion, the half life of various products and policies is shortened, and the opportunities for novel departures expanded. The composition of the workplace is thus in continuous flux. The working person shifts jobs more frequently, often with an accompanying move to another location. In the early 1990s one out of three American workers had been with his or her employer for less than a year, and almost two out of three for less than five years.

As a result of these developments, the individual is challenged with an increasingly variegated array of behavioral demands. With each new performance site, new patterns of action may be required; dispositions, appetites, personas—all may be acquired and abandoned and reappropriated as conditions invite or demand. With movements through time and space, oppositional accents may often be fashioned: firm here and soft there, commanding and then obedient, sophisticated and then crude, righteous and immoral, conventional and rebellious. For many people such chameleon-like shifts are now unremarkable; they constitute the normal hurly burly of daily life. At times the challenges may be enjoyed, even sought. It was only four decades ago that David Riesman's celebrated book, *The Lonely Crowd*, championed the virtues of the inner-directed man and condemned the other-directed individual for lack of character—a man without a gyroscopic center of being.<sup>4</sup> In the new techno-based ethos there is little need for the inner-directed, one-style-for-all individual. Such a person is narrow, parochial, inflexible. In the fast pace of the technological society, concern with the

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<sup>4</sup> See David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953).

inner life is a luxury—if not a waste of time. We now celebrate protean being. In either case, the interior self recedes in significance.<sup>5</sup>

*Repetition.* Let us consider a more subtle mode of self-erosion, owing in this instance to the increasing inundation of images, stories, and information. Consider here those confirmatory moments of individual authorship, moments in which the sense of authentic action becomes palpably transparent. Given the Western tradition of individualism, these are typically moments in which we apprehend our actions as unique, in which we are not merely duplicating models, obeying orders, or following conventions. Rather, in the innovative act we locate a guarantee of self as originary source, a creative agent, an author of one's own morality. Yet, in a world in which the technologies facilitate an enormous sophistication in "how it goes," such moments become increasingly rare. How is it, for example, that a young couple, who for 20 years have been inundated by romance narratives—on television and radio, in film, in magazines and books—can utter a sweet word of endearment without a haunting sense of cliché? Or in Umberto Eco's terms, how can a man who loves a cultivated woman say to her, "I love you madly," when "he knows that she knows (and that she knows that he knows) that these words have already been written by Barbara Cartland"?<sup>6</sup> In what sense can one stand out from the crowd in a singular display of moral fortitude, and not hear the voices of John Wayne, Gary Cooper, or Harrison Ford just over one's shoulder?

Should one attempt to secure confirmation of agency from a public action—political remonstrance, religious expression, musical performance, and the like—the problems of authenticity are even more acute. First, the existing technologies do not allow us to escape the past. Rather, images of the past are stored, resurrected, and recreated

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Robert Jay Lifton, *The Protean Self: Human Resilience in an Age of Fragmentation* (New York: Basic, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Umberto Eco, *Postscript to The Name of the Rose*, trans. William Weaver (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) 67.

as never before. In this sense, the leap from oral to print memory was only the beginning of a dramatic technological infusion of cultural memory. Thus, it becomes increasingly difficult to avoid observations of how any notable action is historically prepared. To perform publicly is to incite incessant commentaries about how one is, for example, “just like the 60s,” “has his roots in Billy Sunday revivalism,” or “draws his inspiration from Jimmy Hendrix.” Should the public demonstration gain media interest, there is also a slow conversion from the authentic to the instrumental. That is, what may have once seemed spontaneous is now converted to a performance “for the media” and its public. Indulgence in political passion, for example, becomes muted by the attentions one must give to wardrobe, voice projection, and facial expression. One cannot simply “play the music,” but must be concerned with hair styling, posture, and girth. In a world in which the local is rapidly transported to the global, the half-life of moral authenticity rapidly diminishes.

*Transience.* To the extent that one is surrounded by a cast of others who respond to one in a similar way, a sense of a unified self may result. One may come to understand, for example, that he is the first son of an esteemed high school teacher and a devoted mother, a star of the baseball team, and a devout Catholic. This sense of perdurable character also furnishes a standard against which the morality of one’s acts can be judged. One can know that “this just isn’t me,” that “If I did that I would feel insufferable guilt.” However, with the accumulating effects of the technologies of sociation, one now becomes transient, a nomad or a “homeless mind.”<sup>7</sup> The continuous reminders of one’s identity—of who one is and always has been—no longer prevail. The internal standard grows pallid, and in the end, one must imagine that it counts for little in the generation of moral action.

There is a more subtle effect of such techno-induced transience. It is not only a coherent community that lends itself to the sense of per-

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<sup>7</sup> Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (New York: Vintage, 1973).

sonal depth. It is also the availability of others who provide the time and attention necessary for a sense of an unfolding interior to emerge. The process of psychoanalysis is illustrative. As the analyst listens with hovering interest to the words of the analysand, and these words prompt questions of deeper meaning, there is created for the analysand the sense of palpable interiority, the reality of a realm beyond the superficially given, or in effect, a sense of individual depth. The process requires time and attention. And so it is in daily life; one acquires the sense of depth primarily when there is ample time for exploration, time for moving beyond instrumental calculations to matters of “deeper desire,” forgotten fantasies, to “what really counts.” Yet, it is precisely this kind of “time off the merry-go-round” that is increasingly difficult to locate. In the techno-dominated world, one must keep moving, the network is vast, commitments are many, expectations are endless, opportunities abound, and time is a scarce commodity.

Each of these tendencies—toward polyvocality, plasticity, repetition, and transience—function so as to undermine the longstanding presumption of a palpable self, of personal consciousness as an agentive source, or of interior character as a touchstone of the moral life.<sup>8</sup> Yet, while lamentable in certain respects, the waning intelligibility of moral selves is much welcomed in other quarters. Both intellectually and ideologically the concept of the self as moral atom is flawed. On the conceptual level, it is not simply that the conception of moral agency recapitulates the thorny problems of epistemological dualism—subject vs. object, mind vs. body, minds knowing other minds—but the very idea of an *independent* decision maker is unconvincing. How, it is asked, could moral thought take place except within the categories supplied by the culture? If we subtract-

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<sup>8</sup> These conclusions are surely resonant with other accounts of “the loss,” “decentering,” or “deconstruction” of the self in recent scholarship. However, where key writings by Foucault, Lacan, and Derrida derive their conclusions from theoretical premises, the present analysis attempts to trace the sense of dissolution to particular circumstances of cultural technology. In effect, one might suppose that the very intelligibility of the theoretical analyses may be derived from common experiences in contemporary culture.



ed the entire vocabulary of the culture from individual subjectivity, how could the individual form questions about justice, duty, rights, or moral goods? In Michael Sandel's terms, "To imagine a person incapable of constitutive attachments . . . is not to conceive an ideally free and rational agent, but to imagine a person wholly without character, without moral depth."<sup>9</sup>

These conceptual problems are conjoined to widespread ideological critique. Alexis de Tocqueville's observations of 19th century American life set the stage: "Individualism is a calm and considered feeling which disposes each citizen to isolate himself from the mass of his fellows . . . he gladly leaves the greater society to look after itself."<sup>10</sup> Within recent decades these views have been echoed and amplified by many. Christopher Lasch has traced linkages between individualist presumptions and cultural tendencies toward narcissism;<sup>11</sup> Robert Bellah and his colleagues argue that certain forms of individualism work against the possibility for committed relationships and dedication to community;<sup>12</sup> for Edward Sampson the presumption of a self-contained individual leads to an insensitivity to minority voices, suppression of the other, and social division.<sup>13</sup> Ultimately, the conception of an interior origin of action defines the society in terms of unbreachable isolation. If what is most central to our existence is hidden from the other, and vice versa, we are forever left with a sense of profound isolation, an inability to ever know what lies behind the other's visage. By constituting an interior self we inevitably create the Other from whom we shall forever remain alien.

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982) 179.

<sup>10</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Doubleday, 1969) 506.

<sup>11</sup> See Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism: American Life in an Age of Diminishing Expectations* (New York: Norton, 1979).

<sup>12</sup> See Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> See Edward E. Sampson, *Celebrating the Other: A Dialogic Account of Human Nature, Psychology, Gender, and Theory* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1993).