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The Online Self

Externalism, Friendship and Games

 Springer

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Preface

The idea for this book grew out of the wonderful workshop on “Who Am I Online?” organized by Charlie Ess and Luciano Floridi back in May 10–11, 2010, at the beautiful Kalovig Center outside of Aarhus, Denmark. The idea behind the conference was to investigate the notion of personal identity as it applies to online self or online identity, precisely the topic of this book. Many scholars were invited to join the workshop. Apart from Charlie and Luciano, there were, as I remember, Stine Lomborg, Maria Bakardjieva, Wong Pak-Hang, Janice Richardson, Johanna Seibt, Dave Ward, Raffaele Rodogno, and many others. The idyllic atmosphere of the Kalovig Center was an ideal place for thinking together and engaging in common project of hashing out one’s ideas in order to receive friendly feedback. I first conceived of the ideas presented in this book at the workshop. These ideas then developed and were further refined until they got their present shape in this book. This, however, by no means implies that the ideas are final. I don’t know if there is any idea in philosophy that is final. Perhaps no philosophical idea ever is, and some philosophers do change their minds. But at least they represent what I believe to be the case and the book contains sustained arguments in their support.

The topic I presented at the Aarhus Workshop was “Who Am I Online? A View from Buddhism.” In that I presented a straightforward Buddhist view on self and identity. This idea is by now quite well known so does not need to be repeated here. The argument I made then was that there is a correlation between the online and the offline worlds such that basically the same set of analytical tools can be applied in either. I still believe that this is the case. What I mean by the same set of tools is that, when we try to analyze and understand the situation of the “offline” self, that is, the self that all of us are familiar with, the tools, which also include the vocabulary and the theory that we use to describe and investigate the phenomenon, are the same no matter the self is there in the so-called “real” world or the so-called “virtual” world. Of course the self as existing in the latter world is the subject matter of this book. Here I say “so-called ‘real’ world” with a tongue in cheek. No one can deny that the world as we perceive it, in which we live and breathe, is not real, but I would like to point out that in today’s world the real and the virtual are becoming more and more of the same substance. This does not mean that we are living in a virtual or simulated

world, but I intend to mean that the two worlds are collapsing to each other and the boundary between the two worlds is not as hard and fast as many may believe (this will be more so when what is known as “ubiquitous” or “pervasive” computing becomes more common – I also investigate this phenomenon in the book). Thus, even if Buddhism was developed more than two millennia ago in order to analyze the “offline” self, the same analytical tools in Buddhism can also be used to analyze the “online” self too. This idea also underlies many views that are presented in this book.

However, I would like to point out that even if the book found its inspiration from the Buddhist perspective on the self, this is definitely not a book on the Buddhist view on the online self. That is, my plan is not to say that the self (whether offline or online) is of such and such characteristics because it says so in Buddhism. The plan is rather that I present a series of *independent* arguments intended to support the main theses of the book without relying on the authority of Buddhism. If Buddhist philosophy can be tenable and acceptable to the community of philosophers, it has to stand or fall on its own merit, not because this is what the Buddha taught or otherwise. In fact that would be contrary to the spirit of Buddhism too. Thus you will find the discussion on Buddhism forms only a small part of the book, so readers who are not Buddhists or who are not religious in any way can still benefit from the arguments presented here.

After the Aarhus Workshop I further developed the idea, resulting in a number of journal articles some of which are included in this volume. Naturally I am indebted to a large number of people without whom this book will not have been possible. First of all I would like to thank Charlie Ess and Luciano Floridi, the two co-hosts of the Aarhus Workshop, whose idea on having a meeting on “Who am I online?” sparked my interest in the metaphysics of the online self, a field that involves not only many branches of philosophy such as metaphysics, philosophy of technology, and ethics, but also many academic disciplines outside of philosophy as well, such as communication studies, sociology, anthropology, and history. So another benefit of the topic of this book is that it is interdisciplinary and is quite likely to attract interests of scholars in fields other than philosophy. Charlie Ess has been very helpful to me in many areas. Apart from being such a wonderful host during my Aarhus visit in 2010, our friendship actually developed well before that, dating way back to 1998 when he and Fay Sudweeks organized the first international conference on Cultural Attitudes toward Technology and Communication (CATaC), which has developed into a well-known series of conferences. I had the good fortune of being able to invite Charlie to Thailand twice and hope that our friendship and collaboration do continue. Luciano has been a constant friend who supports my attempts at presenting these philosophical reflections and gives me a generous number valuable comments and suggestions. I also hope that our collaboration continues.

I am also grateful to all the participants of the Aarhus Workshop whose challenges and criticisms of my presentation resulted in the development of the ideas found in this book. I would like also to thank Karamjit Gill, editor of the journal *AI & Society*, who invited me to contribute the paper on ubiquitous computing, and John Weckert, who has also been very helpful to me in various ways, one of which

was that he invited me to contribute another of my paper to the online journal *Information*. Both papers play a large role in the development of ideas which led to this present book.

The road from the Aarhus Workshop to the book has been quite long. Along the way I am also fortunate to receive help and support from various people. Apart from the meeting in Aarhus, I also benefited from a meeting in Bangkok on “Online Studies,” organized by the Thai Netizen Network in November, 2010. The informal and friendly meeting gave me a chance to present my work to people in other academic fields and for the lay public in Thai language. Arthit Suriyawongkul was as always a key person in the Thai Netizen Group who always gave me encouragement. My thanks also go to Elizabeth Buchanan and Michael Zimmer who invited me to talk in a keynote panel of the Computer Ethics/Philosophical Enquiry (CEPE) conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 2011, giving me the opportunity to further reflect on the view that eventually found its home in this book. I would like to thank Philip Brey, Wong Pak-Hang, Johnny Søraker, Axel Gelfert, and Eric Kerr, all of whom play a role in one way or another in my philosophical development.

Bangkok, Thailand

Soraj Hongladarom

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