

Philosophy of Engineering and Technology 25

Soraj Hongladarom

The Online Self

Externalism, Friendship and Games

 Springer

Philosophy of Engineering and Technology

Volume 25

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The Online Self

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Soraj Hongladarom
Faculty of Arts, Department of Philosophy
Chulalongkorn University
Bangkok, Thailand

ISSN 1879-7202 ISSN 1879-7210 (electronic)
Philosophy of Engineering and Technology
ISBN 978-3-319-39073-4 ISBN 978-3-319-39075-8 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-39075-8

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016943192

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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

Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Main Argument of the Book	3
1.2	Structure of the Book	8
	References.....	16
2	The Self Through History	17
2.1	Introduction.....	17
2.2	The Self in Greek Philosophy	18
2.3	The Self in Modern Western Philosophy	23
2.3.1	Early Modern Philosophy and the Online Self	27
2.4	Kant.....	29
2.4.1	Kant and the Online Self.....	31
2.5	Online Self and Liberal Self.....	35
2.6	Hegel	35
2.7	Two Strands of the Self in Western Thought	37
2.8	The Self in Chinese Philosophy	38
2.9	The Self in Indian Philosophy	40
2.9.1	Buddhist Philosophy and Online Self	44
2.10	The Fragmented Self: East and West	46
2.11	Conclusion.....	47
	References.....	48
3	The Extended Self View	51
3.1	Problem of Personal Identity.....	53
3.2	Criticisms	56
3.2.1	Against the Psychological Account.....	56
3.2.2	Against the Bodily Account	61
3.2.3	Against the Narrative Account	63
3.3	Online Personal Identity and the Extended Self View	65
3.3.1	Objections and Replies.....	69
3.4	The Informational Self and the Role of the Body	71

3.5	Externalist Theory of Personal Identity and the Extended Self View	75
3.6	The Extended Mind and the Extended Self.....	80
	References.....	81
4	The Online Self and Philosophy of Technology	83
4.1	Martin Heidegger	84
4.2	Jacques Ellul.....	88
4.3	Herbert Marcuse.....	90
4.4	Albert Borgmann.....	92
4.5	Don Ihde.....	94
4.6	Hubert Dreyfus.....	97
4.7	Andrew Feenberg.....	100
4.8	Agency	102
4.9	Continuity.....	108
4.10	Agency, Continuity and Philosophy of Technology.....	112
	References.....	115
5	Selves, Friends and Identities in Social Media	117
5.1	Aristotelian Conception of Friendship	118
5.2	Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Online Friends.....	127
5.3	Online Friendship and Authenticity	130
5.4	Online Self and Online Friend	139
5.5	Conclusion: A Critical Look—What Does the Extended Self View Offer?.....	142
	References.....	144
6	Computer Games, Philosophy and the Online Self.....	147
6.1	What Is an Avatar?	148
6.2	Relation Between the Player and the Avatar	150
6.3	Fictionalism and the Material Divide.....	157
6.4	Brain to Brain Integration and Complete Erasure of the Boundary.....	161
	References.....	164
	Conclusion	165
	Index.....	169

Chapter 1

Introduction

Today we find social media everywhere. In Thailand where I live and work, it is becoming more difficult to walk on the streets of Bangkok and find someone who is not looking at her smart phones, using her thumbs to chat with her friends and enjoying the pictures and texts offered there. On the new electric train system that is fast becoming a familiar scene in the city, people either sit or stand with their eyes focusing on their phones, ostensibly oblivious to what is going on around them. It is as if their brains are being plugged on to a giant network so that their reality is what happens on the screen of their phones rather than outside. In restaurants it is not uncommon to find couples sitting together at a table. In the old days they might look at each other's eyes and talking to each other, but today they look more at their own smart phones rather than at each other. The world is indeed changing. If these scenes are becoming a familiar sight in Bangkok, they are indeed happening everywhere. Admittedly these scenes are not happening outside of the Bangkok metropolis much, but it is getting there as smart phones are one of the top selling electronic items all over the country. People all over Thailand who can afford them snap them up very fast.

Most of the applications these people use when they look at their phones are the social media. Names are already familiar: Facebook and Twitter, and to a lesser extent but up and coming, Google Plus. In the recent past the names might include MySpace or Hi5, but these sites are largely neglected by the social media savvy users now. A trip back to Hi5, for a typical Thai internet user, recalls nostalgic scenes from the recent, pre-Facebook past. This is rather surprising because social media are in fact a new type of websites, having come on to the scene only a few years ago. Before these social media sites there were web sites that offered text-based discussion forums. These used to be highly popular in Thailand, as people found it exhilarating to be able to discuss almost anything, using almost any kind of language, with their peer from all around the country. This was something they were not able to do before. Certainly there were limits to this freedom. The draconian *lèse majesté* law against insulting the king is still in place, but even that could not dampen the enthusiasm and the speed with which Thai people gobble up web discussion

forums and later social networking sites. Here in Thailand one popular website still survives and is in fact thriving in the age of sophisticated social networking sites—Pantip.com. This shows a connection between the older discussion forum and today's social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. In fact many users have accounts in both Pantip.com and Facebook and they routinely share material from one to the other, thus merging the content of the two.

What is most interesting in the phenomenon of either the web discussion forum or social networking sites is how the users present their selves in the online world. In the former they did not have much leeway to do so, as the technology was not sophisticated enough. So they were limited to putting up their pseudonyms and perhaps a small picture to represent themselves. But in Facebook and Twitter these “online selves” are actually becoming more mature. Users have the ability to form their own profile page where they announce to the outside world who they are or, perhaps more accurately, who they want the world to perceive them to be. Thus this is the subject matter of this book. The main concern of the book is on the metaphysical constitution of the online self. What exactly is it? What are the relations between the online self and their “offline” counterpart, that is, the normal self with which we are already familiar? These questions are important because as people are more and more hooked up with social media, the role of the online selves is more and more visible and significant. Facebook advertises itself as a *social* media. That is, the website regards itself as a tool to connect people together. In order for that to be possible, people have to have an online presence on the website. In other words, they have to put up their online counterparts there. It is as if parts of their own selves are put there on the website. And when the social media play more prominent roles in people's lives, it appears as if the selves that are there play more roles, and seem to take on a more or less independent status by themselves. It is not uncommon nowadays to find people whose reputation depends more on their online selves than on their usual selves in the outside world. It is then an emerging phenomenon made possible by the social media, and since the latter is a product of information technology, another dimension of the problem to be investigated in the book is on how technology affects the sense of self and the relation between the self and the world. Social networking sites are made possible by technology; at one level of description the online self is nothing but a collection of ones and zeroes, as are all things digital. However, this collection of ones and zeroes can have very strong impact on the world, especially when people depend more on the social media and present themselves through these media. As the online self is becoming more real and as it plays more roles in lives, they have to be analyzed in terms of more than just ones and zeroes. And here is where the difficulty is. How could we best characterize the online self? What kind of language should be the one most suitable to describe it for our purposes? And as technology plays a constitutive role, what are the relations between the technologies of the internet and the online self?

Furthermore, as the online self plays more roles in society, it is bound to generate another sort of questions, one that concern ethical values. The idea behind social networking sites is that people represent who they really are in the online arena. That is, the offline and the online selves should match. But what happens if someone

invents a new identity and presents it online in such a way that does not bear any resemblance to who he or she actually is? This is a big problem because the whole idea of social networking appears to depend on the authenticity of the two kinds of selves. What actually gets connected together on the social networking sites are, exactly speaking, online selves. I put my profile and my digital self online so that my digital self could connect with yours on the networking platform. But if there are discrepancies between the self I put online and my own real self, then how can my friends know that the one they are interacting with is indeed me? How can they find me on the Internet if I don't use my real name, for example, or don't advertise my pseudonym so widely that they can come to know?

We can see that there are a whole host of problems surrounding the online self, so much, I think, that this book could not cover all of them and can actually provide only a sketch of the possible problems. In any case, the main methodological concern of the book is philosophical. That is, I intend to use mainly philosophical tools and vocabulary to analyze and investigate the problems. This is not to say that empirical studies are not important. They are indeed very important, and I rely on them in cases where such studies help us understand more of the situation that is under discussion. Nonetheless, they are not the main concern. The main concern, on the contrary, is to look at the online self as a phenomenon for philosophical analysis. This importance of relying philosophical analysis can be seen most clearly, I think, when we analyze the role of technology in society. Here we can put the phenomenon of the online self and the social media in general as a topic under technology in society. Hence the book can also be regarded as a contribution in philosophy of technology. Philosophy of technology has been mostly concerned with how technology is related to human beings. Not in the sense of the humans as users or manipulators, but as beings who, phenomenologically, stand in relation to technology as the self stands to the other, or perhaps as one phenomenological being having a relation with another phenomenological being. In other words philosophy of technology is not concerned with humans merely interfacing with technology, but with the question of value that inevitably arises when humans stand face to face with technology.

1.1 Main Argument of the Book

The main argument I present in the book concerns implications of the view that the self is a composite entity and does not exist on its own. Many findings from neuroscience concur that the source of the sense of the self in an individual cannot be pinpointed in any particular region of the brain. In contrast to specific functions such as vision and hearing, self-consciousness is distributed globally throughout the brain and there is no one specific region that is responsible for it. Instead the sense of the self arises out of the awareness that one is a unified entity that is set against the world—the origin of the primordial sense of the subject and the object. In *The Ego Tunnel*, Thomas Metzinger argues in no uncertain terms that the self does not

exist (Metzinger 2009). Instead the brain constructs a model of the self, what Metzinger calls the Phenomenal Self Model (Metzinger 2009, p. 2). In other words, the self is as much an illusion created by the brain, something those who watch the National Geographic series *Brain Games* will be immediately familiar. Metzinger refers to an experiment where the subject puts her right hand down under the table, leaving the other hand on. On the place of where the right hand should have been is a rubber hand instead. Metzinger shows that the subject somehow has an illusion that the rubber hand is her hand and feels something on the rubber hand as the hand is stroked by a feather. Of course she cannot actually feel anything because that hand is a rubber one and has no nervous connection to herself. Nonetheless her brain assumes that the rubber hand belongs to her self and starts to trigger the tickly feeling of being stroked by a feather (Metzinger 2009, p. 3–4). Here, then, is where a lot of confusion occurs when the issue of the existence of the self is discussed. On the one hand, scholars such as Metzinger argue that the self does not exist. This also goes along with the Buddhist tenet of the Non-Self. Basically the tenet is the same—the self does not, strictly speaking, exist. But the confusion starts when one tries to explicate what actually constitutes “strictly speaking.” According to Buddhism, in normal, everyday conversation it would be absurd to maintain that the self does not exist. Even Buddhist philosophers have to refer to themselves from time to time. That is just a part of everyday language use. However, when analysis is applied, it is found, so Buddhist philosophy argues, that the self as normally understood is found to be nothing but a group of elements taken to relate to one another in one particular way. In other words, the self is in fact an illusion. But illusions do indeed exist, and in the rubber hand experiment the subject does indeed feel something when the rubber hand is stroked. So on the one hand the rubber hand does not belong to the subject’s body—that much is obvious, but on the other hand the subject does feel something when the rubber hand is stroked, showing that her brain takes on the hand as a part of her body. According to the third-person objective model, the rubber hand is only a rubber hand, but according to the phenomenological, first-person viewpoint model, the rubber hand is part of the body. In the same vein, from one perspective the self does not exist (what exists are only blips inside the brain, for example), but from another the self clearly exist, as for example when one feels that *one* is having a headache. The dependence of the self’s “existence” on perspectives also go along with what Buddhist philosophy has to say.

Antonio Damasio puts this point very well. Answering the question whether there is a self and if there is one, whether the self is present whenever we are conscious, he says:

The answers are unequivocal. There is indeed a self, but it is a process, not a thing, and the process is present at all times when we are presumed to be conscious. We can consider the self process from two vantage points. One is the vantage point of an observer appreciating a *dynamic* object—the dynamic object constituted by certain workings of minds, certain traits of behavior, and a certain history of life. The other vantage point is that of the self as *knower*, the process that gives a focus to our experiences and eventually lets us reflect on those experiences (Damasio 2012, p. 8–9).

According to Damasio, the self operates at two levels, and we can safely say that what he actually means is the self-as-subject and the self-as-object, or in Damasio's terms the self as knower and as a dynamic object. The distinction between the self and other, subject and object, is very fundamental to the consciousness of a self; in fact the two constitute each other. We cannot have a consciousness of a self without a consciousness of the subject and object, and the other way round. Thus, it appears that there are two senses of the self. Viewed either as an object or as a knower, the self is a process in both cases. Its existence is a function of certain attitude that we take toward the world. In Buddhist term, this is what is meant by the expression "the self is not an inherently existing object." That is to say, the self does not exist on its own without being dependent on other factors.

In other words, the self is a second-order awareness; it arises when one reflects on the thoughts that one have, that one is having thoughts which are about things in the world, and *that* requires that there be someone who is the thinker of the thought. Instead of the organism only having a series of thoughts about the world around it which are distributed and diffused throughout the world, where the point of view of the onlooker can be simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, the organism has the perspective from a unified and specific location. This gives a unique perspective according to which the picture of the world comes to the organism as if it is the center of the world. Instead of having mere thoughts about the world which are nowhere and everywhere, the thoughts are those belonging to this unique perspective, thoughts that are related to a unique thinker, and this is what is meant by the first-person pronoun. What the recent findings in neuroscience shows is that this sense of a unique perspective is a second-order awareness arising out of many regions of the brain working together. This gives the self a unique position in that on the one hand, it very obviously exists, but on the other hand, since it is actually speaking a second-order perspective with which we arrange our perceptive awareness of reality, it does not exist within that reality. This gives rise to the famous Buddhist view that the self does not exist as an "inherently existing" entity. What the Buddhist means here is that the self does not exist at the first-order level of reality, the same level of rocks and flowers, but it certainly exists at the second-order level.

What this means for the online world is that we can compare thoughts about the world as postings and comments which are ubiquitous on the social network. Here I focus on the self as it appears in the online world, and does not look at how different forms of the online world might affect the character of the online self or not. In fact the self as it appears on, say, Facebook and Twitter are somewhat different one from the other. But that is not my main concern for the book. Without the sense of a self, those posts and comments belong to no one and they would be diffused to every corner of the online reality. Imagine posts and comments from no one in particular, those that can be found everywhere just as they are parts of the environment of the social network itself, then one gets an inkling of what it is like for thoughts without a thinker. In order for the posts and comments, whatever information is shared on the network, to belong to someone and for them to originate from a unified perspective, they have to come from someone and that someone is an online self. On

Facebook whatever I post and comment will be accompanied by my name (which could be my real name as is the case or could be any invented name) and my profile picture. This is the way Facebook groups all these posts and comments and shared pictures so that they always belong to *someone*. There are no posts or comments on Facebook which originate from no one in particular. However, those belonging-to-no-one posts are certainly possible on the network, and those are the correlates of belonging-to-no-one thoughts that we have seen earlier.

This view that the self arises out of second-order awareness forms the basis on which the philosophical analysis of the online self in this book is made. Another point that I would like to argue for is that the self is a composite entity. This is also old news. What I mean is that the term 'self' is more like a collective noun such as 'herd' or 'army' rather than one that denotes a single entity. A herd of cattle consist of at least more than one cow. Each cow in the herd, taken singly, is not the herd, but it is all the cows taken together that form the herd. In the same vein, a single soldier is not an army, but a number of soldiers joined together in a specific manner constitute an army. The self is a composite entity in the sense that there are a large number of elements that when taken together constitute a self, but when each of them is considered one by one none of them is a self on its own (in the same way as no one cow is a herd on its own). Thus, it is more how these elements are related together that is constitutive of a self rather than its internal characteristic (whatever that may be). In the online world, this translates to the situation where the online self is constituted by a number of posts, comments, status updates, shared pictures, etc. that can be grouped together as belonging to one particular online persona. Facebook tries to make that look easy by attaching a name and a profile picture on these postings, but that is actually tantamount to attaching a name on the various elements that together constitute a self. The problem is how exactly is it that these disparate posts and comments actually belong to a self in such a way that the self cannot be identified with any one of these postings, but to all of them taken together. My own writings and sayings are certainly quite numerous, and each of them can in principle have my name put on as a label, but that does not solve the problem of how these thoughts and sayings do constitute who I am as a unified self. It seems that the label comes later; it should not be the case that my unified self arises as a result of these thoughts and sayings are labeled as belonging to Soraj Hongladarom.

This issue of labeling points toward another important topic in this book, which is personal identity. In order to analyze what it means to be an online self, attention is paid to how an identity of the self or the person in the online world is established. The question has a long history. As we shall see in Chap. 3, Locke is credited as the first philosopher who takes up the topic of personal identity and proposes that one's memory is a necessary and sufficient condition for the continuity of one's own person through time. However, a serious problem with the memory account is presented even in Locke's lifetime by Bishop Butler, who argues that the memory account is circular because in order for me to be certain that the memory episode that I entertain is indeed what happened to me, there has to be an independent account that the story inside the memory indeed belongs to me, but according to Locke no such independent account is possible. Butler's argument here forms a

basis of the argument I offer on personal identity, viz., the externalist account. Basically what the externalist position says is that what is going on inside one's subjective horizon is not sufficient to guarantee one's identity through time. One needs the help of external factors, i.e., what lies outside of one's subjective horizon. This can be anything, such as one's own birth certificate or the testimony of one's own mother. We will see this argument in more detail in Chap. 3. Translated to the online world, this means that an account of an identity of an online self or person also requires the help of external matter. It is not sufficient for one to be certain of one's own identity relying on one's memory alone. What ties up a post on the social network in, say, 2009, as an episode of my online self as exists now in 2014, needs some kind of verification from outside, such as coherence of the 2009 post with what happened then, and so on. This argument is also corroborated by recent findings in psychology that one's memory often fails and one sometimes mistakes a psychological episode as a part of one's own memory account.

The externalist account that I present in Chap. 3 leads to another major view that I argue for, namely the Extended Self View, which is the view that the location of the self can be extended outside of the brain and the body of the original owner of that particular self. I explicate this view in detail in the last section of Chap. 3. This view originates from Andy Clark and David Chalmers (Clark and Chalmers 1998; see also Menary 2010). It also resonates with Ciano Aydin's view of the mind as being artifactual in nature (Aydin 2013). Clark and Chalmers argue that, instead of regarding the mind as encased within one physical body (or one physical brain), the mind should be considered to extend outside of the body, such that tools that one use, for example, be an extension of one's own mind. Since what is there outside of the body and the skull is usually material, there is nothing in the extended mind thesis against the idea that the mind, extended outside, can be something material too. In this sense, then, smart phones are the quintessential extended mind. It is as if the brain is split open and comes in the form of a lovely rectangular object that one can hold and have a look at the beautiful images on it. As people depend more on their smart phones for cognitive tasks such as searching phone numbers, looking up facts, searching maps, performing calculation, setting up meeting schedules, and so on, it is as if these tasks, which we can see plainly as objective events, are instances of mental and cognitive tasks that are objectified in such a way that the smart phones are extensions of one's own mind. We shall also see this in detail in Chap. 3. As for the implication for the online world, the extended mind shows that one's mind, and hence one's sense of self, can be extended outward and thus can be extended to the cyberreality that is there in the social network or other types of online happenings too. In this case the online self is an extension of the real, offline self, and, as I shall also argue that there is a strong trend toward a merger of the online and offline worlds, the offline self is also an extension of the online one too.

My argument that the offline and online selves are extensions of each other appears to clash with the view that the self is intimately tied up with the physical body. Taking a cue from Merleau-Ponty's argument on the phenomenology of perception (Merleau-Ponty 1962), where the body is a necessary basis for perception and thus phenomenological account, many scholars and philosophers argue that the