

A Phenomenological Study of Social Media:
Boredom and Interest on Facebook, Reddit, and 4chan

by

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BA, Thompson Rivers University, 2004

MA, York University, 2005

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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Optimists used to suggest that the anonymity of the internet allows people to interact without prejudices about race, sex, or age. Although some websites still foster anonymous communication, their popularity pales in comparison with sites like Facebook that *foreground* identifying characteristics. These social network sites claim to enrich their users' lives by cultivating connections, but they sometimes have the opposite effect. Given the widespread and growing use of social media, my research poses the following questions: Does a particular form of (dis)engagement with the world flow from the reduction of the person to a profile? Does this (dis)engagement extend beyond social media, possibly into the way that we understand the world as such? What can we conclude about the broader theoretical framework in which an analysis of social media might be couched?

I answer these questions through Martin Heidegger's work, which provides the theoretical orientation for the dissertation as a whole. Noting that history informs the way that he understands ontology (Chapter One), I argue that the social changes that are accompanying the spread of the internet suggest modifications to his characterizations of boredom (Chapter Two) and technology (Chapter Three). I then turn to three emblematic social media sites – Facebook, which renders its users connected and *identifiable* (Chapter Four); Reddit, which gathers its users into a *pseudonymous* community of common interest (Chapter Five); and 4chan, which demands that its users engage in an *anonymous* fashion (Chapter Six) – and analyze them using the framework developed above while drawing from them to alter that framework further. I claim that although the patterns of use apparent on these sites differ, they all express different aspects of the mood that holds sway over the internet. Social media is both the cause of, and solution to, boredom, and it is shaping a generalized mood that is coming to seem ontological in its purchase.

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Dedication

To my parents, whose early purchase of a personal computer put me online at just the right time.

Epigraph

Never yet, however, has the case been heard of in philosophy where a bland triviality did not conceal behind it the abyssal difficulty of the problem.

— Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*

Introduction: Causes of and Solutions to

Google Canada automatically completes search entries with a function called Google Suggest. As you type into the search box, Suggest “guesses” what you’re thinking about and provides up to 10 suggestions, ranked according to the number of websites returned and the overall popularity of various searches. Entering “music”, for instance, returns the following:

- music videos
- music downloads
- music lyrics
- music charts
- music quotes
- music jesus
- music torrents
- music notes
- music download sites
- music theory

The first search term, “music videos”, returns approximately 213 million results, the second 99 million, the third 43 million, and so on down the list.¹

But searching for “music” is pretty boring. Other search terms turn up more entertaining results. When I ask Google “why”, I’m prompted to ask why I can’t own a Canadian, why the sky is blue, and why my poop is green. “Is life” is followed first by a query about taxation in Canada and then immediately by “is life worth living”. “Does” yields a number of practical results as well as “does he like me”, “does god exist”, and “does size matter”. Most interesting, though, is the first result for “i am”:

¹ This result and those that follow were obtained in 2009. Actual search results change continuously based on the relative popularity of certain terms.

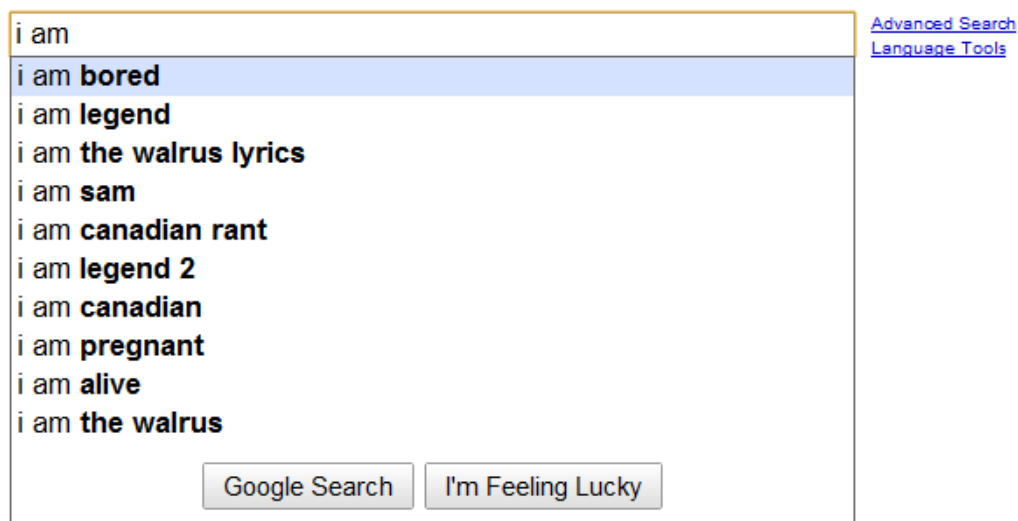


Figure 1: Google Suggest²

I stumbled across this result one evening when I was playing around on the internet.³ Let me rephrase: I saw the result one evening when I was *bored*. I went online to escape that boredom. Going online wasn't a conscious act – at no point did I think to myself, “I'm bored right now, so I should go onto the internet and find something to entertain myself with” – but I nevertheless found myself online, following some unconscious, habitual behaviour that resulted in my typing search terms into Google and laughing to myself. After a while, I grew bored with Suggest, and moved on to something else.

The internet and boredom have a strange relationship. When I'm bored, I go online, but often I find that I can't relieve my boredom – or that relief is only temporary. The internet provides a near endless source of distractions, but I still seem to exhaust its

² Screen capture of Google Canada, accessed February 18, 2009, <http://www.google.ca>.

³ Many writers insist on capitalizing the word “internet”. Since this is akin to capitalizing the word “telephone”, I will leave it in lower case.

possibilities on a regular basis – so I was not only entertained when I came across the above search result: I was comforted. Here was evidence that other people were using the internet the same way that I was. I suspected that these other aimless searchers, too, were not looking to “solve” the “problem” of boredom; they knew that this ultimately wouldn’t work. Maybe they were trying to *sustain* it in some way. Maybe they were happy with their boredom.

When I clicked through to the search results for “i am bored”, I found evidence for this claim in the number of websites supposedly dedicated to sustaining boredom – not resolving it. Sites like i-am-bored.com, helpineedhelp.com, and pointlessites.com are dedicated to delivering small, short term amusements that keep their visitors returning to their site again and again. This intention is evident from their sites’ design. In the case of I-Am-Bored, for instance, the designers placed a heavy emphasis on advertising: the site features a banner ad at the top of the screen, interstitial ads that break up the content, and a host of other ads on the side.⁴ Clicking through to one of the featured items refreshes these advertisements and resituates them on the screen – a tactic that the site’s designers undoubtedly hoped would draw visitors’ attention from the feature itself. In fact, looking anywhere on the screen except at the featured content seems like it should entice the site’s visitors to click on something in order to refresh the ads and keep them interested, and thereby stop them from going elsewhere.

Now this is obviously “bad design” – there are dozens of different content options, dark colours, an inconsistent font, and an absurd number of unrelated ads that help make I-Am-Bored ugly and terribly dated – but it must have appealed to someone at

⁴ These include contextual Google ads, large box graphical ads, a link through to a CafePress t-shirt store for the website, social media widgets, and links to associated time killing websites.

some point in the past.⁵ Still, I-Am-Bored looks embarrassing when placed next to other content-aggregating and time-wasting sites where links go through to content hosted elsewhere. Reddit, for instance, needs to generate revenue from advertising and the sale of things like t-shirts and calendars, but its designers are more interested in delivering content than ads, rightfully thinking that this will be a more effective way of generating traffic and advertising revenue. Reddit appeals to a smarter set of users than I-Am-Bored, expecting that even if these users leave the site to read an article or look at a video somewhere else, they will return to discover further content. Reddit is designed with loyalty in mind. Conversely, I-Am-Bored wants its users to stay within its domain for as long as possible on any single visit. In both cases, however, the point of the design is *capture* – keeping users of these websites captivated and at least a little bored.

I could say more about the way that different websites try to capture their visitors' attention, but for now I want to return to the beginning of the browsing chain and to the question of the relationship between boredom and the internet. Of those Canadians who began to write "i am" into Google's search engine, many selected "i am bored" as their final term. Anyone writing future search terms will see this selection, and might write it as well.⁶ This means that there is, at this front end, a slight incentive towards "engaging" with boredom. With the search term entered, users click through to websites that present temporary distractions while taking in advertisements from the margins of the screen. Their engagement with boredom prolongs the mood due to the attention capturing features of these websites. One conclusion from this may be that it is not only easy to kill

⁵ Constructed in 2002, I-Am-Bored is owned by Demand Media, a social media company founded in 2006. Since Demand Media's own website is comparatively clean and attractive, and since Demand Media owns a number of relatively popular websites (ehow.com, cracked.com, and livestrong.com being among the most popular), it is safe to presume that I-Am-Bored's dated aesthetic must have something going for it.

⁶ By April 2012, "i am" returned "i am bored" as the fourth Google Search result.

time online, but that many different structural features of the internet may even encourage it.

This claim is obviously true for aimless Google searching and for the boredom-oriented websites for which usage means advertisements means money, but I think that it is also true for sites that have ostensibly different aims – like Facebook’s, Reddit’s, and 4chan’s respective claims to foster social connections, bring you the best of the web, and enable anonymous conversation. In the first half of this dissertation, I want to stretch this claim into less obvious territory: there is, I argue, a sort of structural incentive to the maintenance of boredom written into most websites – but not only a structural incentive with regard to the technology of the code, the monitor, or the computer, all of which undoubtedly play a role in shaping our behaviour.⁷ My larger claim is that these technological structures reflect a broader, “metaphysical” structure that works to maintain a near-profound boredom in the user-subject – a boredom that inscribes itself within a distinctly modern logic, albeit one that is historically grounded.

By defending this claim, I aim to demonstrate the significance of the regularly repeated act of passing the time and to lay the groundwork for a discussion of identity, pseudonymity, and anonymity. I do this by examining the correspondence between digital pastimes and the telling ubiquity of the passing of time identified by Martin Heidegger in a lecture course from the late 1920s. In doing so, I argue that the mood of boredom accompanies the use of social media, that this mood has obtained a wide spread, and that the consequences of this ubiquity are not insignificant. It is precisely the seeming unimportance of the low energy state of boredom that makes it powerful.

⁷ On the generally unnoticed impact of different types of code on behaviour, for instance, see Alexander Galloway’s *Protocol: How Control Exists after Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004) and Adrian MacKenzie’s *Cutting Code: Software and Sociality* (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

My focus on Heidegger – a noted critic of technology who died years before the widespread adoption of personal computers, let alone the internet – might seem odd in the context of a dissertation on social media, but it is not arbitrary. Although the social sciences and humanities can turn to a relatively wide number of studies of boredom and a growing number on social media, it is Heidegger’s analysis of the mood that best provokes thought.⁸ This is because his analysis moves beyond the bounds of the concept itself and into a much wider set of claims that I characterize as epochal, and it does so without falling into the trap of totalization. Moreover, it retains a surprising amount of salience today, when the character of boredom – or at least the character of that which we use to stave it off – seems to have changed.

I therefore develop the term *virtual boredom* over the course of the first three chapters of the dissertation in a way that illustrates Heidegger’s second form of boredom, or what he terms “being bored with” – a boredom that lacks a definite object, or a boredom inherent in a situation itself. In these chapters, I demonstrate where that map fits, and where discrepancies exist. I show that the philosophical and political, which is to say epochal, consequences of virtual boredom are roughly consonant with the consequences that Heidegger anticipated for modernity.

In Chapter One, I introduce the concept of boredom, emphasizing its historical character before turning to a discussion of the use to which contemporary philosophers have put it. I explain how the concept can be historically grounded while yielding metaphysical effects, providing an explanation of the term “ontotheology” – a term that Heidegger uses to denote the simultaneous grounding and justification characteristic, he

⁸ And this is, in fact, one of the major aims of this dissertation. Heidegger repeatedly claims that we do not yet know how to think – that we are entrenched in a philosophy bounded by metaphysics, and that thinking itself has become increasingly difficult.

argues, of the history of metaphysics – in the process. In Chapter Two, I outline Heidegger’s three part conception of boredom, arguing that the second “form” of boredom closely describes how we tend to use the internet. Breaking slightly with Heidegger, I argue that interest is a fundamental mode of boredom’s contemporary expression, and that the swing between interest and boredom constitutes distraction. In Chapter Three, I connect ontotheology and boredom to modern technology, showing that the technological understanding of the world as a collection of disposable things relates essentially to the mood of boredom. I again modify Heidegger’s claims here on the basis of preliminary evidence from the way that we actually use the internet, suggesting that this disposability involves the detached, binary evaluation of things as well as their use and discarding.

In the second half of the dissertation, I deploy the concept of virtual boredom to analyze three key sites of social media, asking if this concept adequately describes how these sites are used. I focus on websites in which users present themselves in three very different fashions in order to cover a wide range of possible moods. These analyses demonstrate the applicability of the conceptual framework developed in the first half while also suggesting further important modifications to it. Additionally, they show that a user’s mode of engagement with the internet, which is to say the way that he or she accesses it as someone who is identifiable, pseudonymous, or anonymous, does not seem to present a serious challenge to the wide spread of the mood: virtual boredom appears to be ubiquitous. That said, the analyses of Facebook, Reddit, and 4chan show that there are some important exceptions to this ubiquity.

In Chapter Four, I explore the ideology that informs Facebook's architects, arguing that although Mark Zuckerberg's desire to make the world more "open and connected" involves a worrisome, if predictable, missionary zeal, this desire is not necessarily borne out in the actual services that Facebook offers. The creation of a digital archive in the form of a continually updated, automatically curated timeline of events reveals that Facebook's singular identity is bent towards convenience and distraction rather than active agency. In Chapter Five, I consider the different structural effects that pseudonymity might have on a website's users, considering the mechanisms that inform Redditors' use of the site. I take seriously the widely held conviction that Redditors are rational, deploying a model from rational choice theory to illustrate the potential for irrationality before exploring the reasons for Redditors' somewhat uncertain faith in their community. Taken together, these two chapters help me suggest further modifications to *Ge-stell*. In Chapter Six, I push further away from identity, examining a website where anonymity is institutionalized in order to determine the extent to which virtual boredom is indexed to identity. By considering two modes of anonymous subjectivation, I argue that anonymity tends to be informed by the same socio-cultural conditions that inform identity, or that it is indeed difficult to escape from the usual forces of subjectivation, while also suggesting that 4chan is sometimes capable of fostering a genuinely different way of engaging with the world. I do not argue that there is anything particularly laudable about this mode of engagement, instead claiming that it simply provides evidence of an important alternative to the increasingly dominant way that subjects are formed online. I conclude by advancing the tentative suggestion that radical anonymity

can engender the same form of de-subjectivation as that which Heidegger ascribes to profound boredom.

Chapter One: A Virtual Boredom

This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first, I outline the history of and literature on boredom in order to provide a context in which to situate virtual boredom. My aim is neither to provide a comprehensive account of scholarly work on the topic nor to contrast virtual boredom with those forms that came before, but to indicate that boredom as such is an historical phenomenon. This provides the basis for an engagement with Elizabeth Goodstein's historically grounded thesis on the "rhetoric of reflection" suggested by boredom, and for her incisive, but ultimately problematic, criticism of Heidegger's account. In the second section, I describe boredom's ambiguity with respect to the ambiguity of thinking. Because Heidegger's account of boredom is premised on the critique of metaphysics offered in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, and because this critique strongly prefigures his later work on technology and ontotheology, I begin by briefly recounting Heidegger's understanding of the latter term. Rather than performing an exegesis of the works that explicitly address the concept, I turn to key sections from *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* in order to show that the work on boredom is aligned with Heidegger's later work in its focus on ambiguity and alternatives.

1.1: Boredom

Etymology and Literature

Since boredom advances and boredom is the root of all evil, no wonder, then, that the world goes backwards, that evil spreads. This can be traced back to the very beginning of the world. The gods were bored, and so they created man. Adam was bored because he was alone, and so Eve was created. Thus boredom entered the world, and increased in proportion to the increase in population. Adam was bored alone; then Adam and Eve were bored together; then Adam and Eve and Cain and Abel were bored en famille; then the population of the world increased, and the peoples were bored en masse. To divert themselves they conceived the idea of constructing a tower high enough to reach the heavens. This idea is itself as boring as the tower was high, and constitutes a terrible proof of how boredom gained the upper hand.

— Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

When experienced from the depths of the mood, boredom can seem like an ahistorical phenomenon – something that must always have been with us. Evidence from etymology and literature, not to mention philosophers’ continual reference to the mood,⁹ demonstrates that boredom is distinctly modern, its origins located in the Enlightenment or the Industrial Revolution.¹⁰

The pre-history of the word “boredom” demonstrates the term’s periodicity. Boredom has rough precursors in a number of other terms – *taedium vitae*, *acedia*,

⁹ Philosophers including Augustine, Pascal, Kant, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Benjamin, and Kracauer, to mention just a few, have all written on boredom.

¹⁰ Its current manifestation, however, is arguably postmodern. Leslie Paul Thiele suggests that boredom only truly becomes possible in the contemporary period due simply to the widespread availability of things: postmodern society is one that is “characterized by the abundance of boredom and the boredom with abundance”. Boredom may have arisen in the modern era, but it was the postmodern era that “domesticated it” (“Postmodernization and the Routinization of Novelty: Heidegger on Boredom and Technology,” *Polity* 29.4 (1997), 495). That clarification made, I will, in large part, treat the “modern” and the “postmodern” in a similar fashion in this chapter, since this distinction has only minor consequence on my thesis: rather than distinguishing between modernity and postmodernity on the basis of boredom’s societal function, I intend to show that the character of boredom itself changes in the contemporary period, becoming virtual.

melancholy, malaise, spleen, and so on¹¹ – but, as Goodstein notes, “can be identified with none of them”.¹² The word “to bore” in fact only enters the English language in the 1760s, around the same time that the roughly synonymous *kjedsomhet* and *Langeweile* enter Norwegian and German.¹³ Additionally, the term “boredom” has none of the Christian connotations of *acedia*, for instance: it is a listlessness, but it is not a moral failing to which only the weak-spirited monk might succumb. The “domestication” of boredom, Leslie Paul Thiele argues, suggests that the phenomenon is a modern one,¹⁴ though even within the modern period, the way that the term is used has changed.¹⁵

The literary context adds further evidence to suggest that boredom is distinctly modern. Patricia Meyer Spacks presents the definitive contemporary survey of literary works that concern boredom, demonstrating that we can use the presence of the mood in the last 200 years of literature to understand the cultural conditions that gave rise to it.¹⁶ Reinhard Kuhn, writing 20 years earlier, argues that boredom is in fact the dominant theme of 20th century literature,¹⁷ but that this dominance is only the recent expression of

¹¹ Each survey of boredom presented here discusses some version of the history of these terms. The most straightforward can be found in Seán Desmond Healy’s *Boredom, Self, and Culture* (London and Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1984), 15-24. Healy goes on to argue that the 20th century is seeing a rise in “hyperboredom” – an aggressive “*counterinterest*” linked to anger as often as depression (Ibid, 58-60).

¹² Elizabeth S. Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities: Boredom and Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), 4.

¹³ Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, trans. John Irons (London: Reaktion Books, 2005), 24. The first instance of “to bore” coincides exactly with the first instance of “interesting”: both enter the English language in 1768 (Patricia Meyer Spacks, *Boredom: The Literary History of a State of Mind* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1995)), 13-15. The two terms, as I show later, are inherently linked.

¹⁴ Thiele, “Postmodernization and the Routinization of Novelty,” 495.

¹⁵ Spacks notes that boredom was still understood in moral terms in the 18th century, “its causes always internal”, but that it became understood in external terms, as caused by capitalism or technology, for instance, by the 20th century (*Boredom*, xi).

¹⁶ “[I]t would seem that boredom has assumed broad explanatory power in a society widely felt to be baffling. The narcissism many writers of the past associated with boredom as psychic malady now appears to be a collective condition; so too does boredom” (Spacks, *Boredom*, 272).

¹⁷ Reinhard Kuhn, *The Demon of Noontide: Ennui in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976).

a universal experience – a “transhistorical plague” dating back to the Greeks.¹⁸

Goodstein argues not only that Kuhn’s transhistorical understanding of boredom covers over a wide array of vital historical and cultural differences, but that this “philosophical” understanding of the mood – she means the term pejoratively – is itself a symptom of how boredom manifests in the 20th century.¹⁹

My brief survey notes only a few points demonstrating modernity’s preoccupation with boredom; there are a number of direct studies of the mood that provide a much more thorough history and a range of interpretations.²⁰ Of these, Lars Svendsen’s is the most accessible. Svendsen covers much of the literature referenced above, using it to argue that the boredom of modernity relates directly to the loss of traditional sources of meaning that characterizes the epoch:

Boredom becomes widespread when traditional structures of meaning disappear. In modernity the subject is released from tradition and has to seek new meanings for itself. The modern subject does so via transgressions of various kinds, but is left more bereft after each new transgression.²¹

Svendsen argues that this “meaning deficit” is the result of the passivity bred by modern technology.²²

Svendsen’s study was released in English in the same year as Goodstein’s more thorough, critical interrogation of boredom. In *Experience without Qualities: Boredom*

¹⁸ Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities*, 33-34.

¹⁹ Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, 47.

²⁰ In addition to those mentioned above, see Orin Klapp’s *Overload and Boredom: Essays on the Quality of Life in the Information Society* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986); Ian Irvine’s *The Angel of Luxury and Sadness (Vol. 1): The Emergence of the Normative Ennui Cycle* (Booksurge, 2001); and the essays collected in a recent volume of *Critical Studies*, particularly Barbara Dalle Pezze and Carlo Salzani, “The Delicate Monster: Modernity and Boredom,” *Critical Studies* 31 (2009): 5-33 and Isis I. Leslie, “From Idleness to Boredom: On the Historical Development of Modern Boredom,” *Critical Studies* 31 (2009): 35-59.

²¹ Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*, 153.

²² *Ibid*, 29. Though I will connect boredom to modern technology as well, I part ways with Svendsen on his reading of Heidegger and on the importance he places on the establishment of meaning in the world.

and Modernity, she carries out close readings of Reinhard Kuhn, Wolf Lepenies,²³ Georg Simmel,²⁴ Martin Heidegger, and Robert Musil. The first four writers address boredom directly, writing respectively on its existential necessity, its socio-cultural causes, its link to urbanization, and its ontological profundity; the fifth rarely speaks of boredom directly, and, Goodstein argues, thereby avoids the discursive limitations into which the other four run, namely the transhistorical assumptions made by both the “philosophical humanists” (or “idealists”)²⁵ and the “social scientists” (or “materialists”).²⁶ I will provide a brief summary of her main arguments before turning to her criticism of Heidegger’s “existential grammar”.

The Rhetoric of Reflection

Goodstein uses Kuhn and Lepenies to argue that modernity brought with it the various different conditions needed to “democratize” leisure, not least of these being the modern subject, thereby enabling the widespread “rhetoric of interiority” that is the real mark of boredom.²⁷ This was accompanied by a Nietzschean “democratization of

²³ Goodstein focuses particularly on Wolf Lepenies, *Melancholy and Society*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris Jones (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

²⁴ Goodstein focuses particularly on Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, ed. Donald N. Levine (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), 324-39.

²⁵ Kuhn’s assumption “that a timeless form of ennui as an intellectual and spiritual phenomenon can be experientially distinguished from more ordinary boredom”, for instance, “appears to depend on historical and cultural tenets that are by no means innocent” (Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities*, 63).

²⁶ Lepenies, for instance, “places historical material in the service of an ahistorical understanding of human experience” (67-68).

²⁷ *Ibid*, 90.

skepticism” in which the metaphysical truths that once informed daily life were stripped away.²⁸ The “corollary” of this democratization, Goodstein argues,

was a democratization of boredom. As the conditions of mass leisure emerged, an initially elitist discourse of subjective disaffection gradually took hold in popular culture, so that by the early twentieth century the experience of ennui had become truly universal.²⁹

This sceptical ennui stretches today into the subject itself – “doubt, self-doubt, and deeply felt unfreedom seem to have become constitutive elements of modern identity”³⁰ – and thereby encourages a rhetoric of *reflection* on the subject. This is what the various discourses on boredom signify, Goodstein argues: modernity involves a new *way of feeling* about the subject, “or more precisely, a form of reflective distance that becomes a new attitude toward experience altogether”.³¹

In order to illustrate this attitude and explain what it signifies, Goodstein turns from the “idealists” and the “materialists” who address boredom directly to a writer who indirectly approaches the mood by exemplifying the rhetoric of reflection on subjectivity, and who thereby manages to “diagnose” this modern “human condition”.³² Musil’s *The Man without Qualities* presents Ulrich, a man for whom “[i]t doesn’t matter what one does”, who had one day “stopped wanting to be a young man of promise” and consciously let the world carry him along.³³ For Goodstein, the novel prompts a reflection on experience that is not already coded by the worn rhetoric of boredom,

²⁸ Ibid, 98.

²⁹ Ibid, 99.

³⁰ Ibid, 103.

³¹ Ibid, 3.

³² Ibid, 334.

³³ Robert Musil, *The Man without Qualities Volume I: A Sort of Introduction*, trans. Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser (London: Secker and Warburg, 1953), 8, 46.

thereby allowing its readers to “think historically” about apparently subjective experiences.³⁴ The rhetorical strategies of *The Man without Qualities* locates the problem of modern subjectivity in both “historical” and “metaphorical” terms, thereby encouraging the reader to understand subjectivity and the rhetoric of reflection “not as existential but as historical phenomena”.³⁵

The above is clearly a gloss on a complicated and compelling reading of both Musil and boredom. I present this summary of Goodstein’s main argument in order to contextualize her reading of Heidegger. I will argue that he, too, encourages his readers to understand subjectivity in “historical” terms, but that his ontological understanding of history enables him to emphasize its existential importance as well.

Goodstein has nothing against philosophical readings of boredom (or anything else), but convincingly argues that philosophical readings sometimes ignore the historical conditions that inform them. This is why she reads Musil in such a favourable light. She alleges that although Heidegger begins his analysis historically, he ends the same way as other philosophers, “effacing the historical and discursive context” of his analysis “in the name of a renewal of metaphysics”.³⁶ At times, her reading presents relatively generous criticisms of Heidegger’s project: she says that the description of boredom as a “fundamental mood” leaves the term “abstract”, argues that the distinction between “mundane” and “deep” boredom is elitist, and says that Heidegger fails to ground his claims in specific experiences.³⁷ Although I disagree with these criticisms – I will spend part of the following chapters arguing that the notion of a “fundamental mood” is tied to

³⁴ Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities*, 336-37.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 394.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 280.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 282-83.

an historically situated Dasein,³⁸ that Heidegger is not suggesting that “mundane” boredom (much like inauthentic Being-in-the-world) is something to be morally condemned, and that he makes reference to specific experiences – I am willing to grant their fairness.

At other times, however, Goodstein reveals that her understanding of Heidegger’s conception of boredom is based on a reading of *Being and Time* and his other writings of the late 1920s as a deeply conservative, even fascistic, philosophical exercise. In discussing the “political implications” of Heidegger’s analysis of boredom, for instance, she claims that “Heidegger clearly hopes for a renewal that goes beyond the lecture hall, an aspiration that... uncannily prefigures his objectives in taking over the Freiburg Rectorate in 1933”.³⁹ These objectives include the “mandarin rejection of ordinary everydayness”, or the “condemnation of quotidian life”: “Heidegger’s analysis belongs to the long tradition that sees boredom as exposing the truth about the inauthenticity of modern life from the perspective of the superior individual”.⁴⁰ These presentations of Heidegger’s thought wilfully ignore his own comments on the various inauthentic ways that Dasein comports itself:

Idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity characterize the way in which, in an everyday manner, Dasein is its “there” – the disclosedness of Being-in-the-world. As definite existential characteristics, these are not present-at-hand in Dasein, but help to make up its Being. In these, and in the way they are interconnected in their Being, there is revealed a basic kind of Being which belongs to everydayness; we call this the “*falling*” of Dasein.⁴¹

³⁸ Given the difficulty of translating Dasein and given its widespread use, I elect to not italicize the word.

³⁹ Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities*, 309.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 308n, 311, 323.

⁴¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962), 175. All references to *Being and Time* are to the German pagination.

These inauthentic modes of comportment, Heidegger is saying, are inherent to Dasein, and therefore inherent to being. Since they can be understood in ontological terms, they are beyond mere condemnation. The way that we normally live in the world is not a “bad thing”. He states this explicitly: “[t]his term [“falling”] does not express any negative evaluation, but is used to signify that Dasein is proximally and for the most part *alongside* the “world” of its concern”.⁴² Most of the time, we do not comport ourselves directly towards Being as such, but instead find ourselves oriented towards objects of daily concern. Indeed, we could not get by in the world if we did not operate inauthentically. Just as Heidegger does not see idle talk as something worthy of moral condemnation, then, he does not see mundane boredom in those terms either: it is something normal and necessary.

These issues of word choice aside, I want to focus on Goodstein’s claim that Heidegger’s use of “‘history’ in the more conventional sense serves as an alibi for the absence of existential authenticity”,⁴³ since I advance the argument, later in this chapter, that Heidegger understands ontology – Being itself – in historical terms. Her complaint about Heidegger mirrors her complaint about Kuhn, Lepenies, and a number of others: in writing about boredom in decidedly philosophical terms, he fails to see that his argument has been shaped by “an historically specific discourse on boredom”.⁴⁴ In “center[ing] philosophical questions on the self” as opposed to, say, the collective, and in basing his argument on the self’s supposedly existential comportment towards death, he fails to take

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Goodstein, *Experience without Qualities*, 324.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 322.

account of how this self has been historically and culturally produced.⁴⁵ Instead, he elevates an abstract conception of the human as Dasein and suggests that the task of philosophy is to use phenomena like anxiety and boredom to clarify Dasein's existential structures. According to Goodstein, Heidegger thinks that accomplishing this will achieve an ill-defined "renewal of metaphysics".

One of the problems with Goodstein's argument is her misunderstanding of the relationship between the existential structures of Dasein and the world. As Goodstein presents it, Dasein can (and should) be understood in transhistorical, "ontological" terms: we can safely assume that Dasein has *always* been thrown into the world, related to others, and focused on the inevitability of its own death. This reading of Heidegger's project is not unusual, but it covers up the vital role that cultural and historical, or ontical, phenomena play in mediating the relationship between Dasein and the world. To take an explanatory example, consider the well known description of equipment and readiness-to-hand from *Being and Time*: Heidegger argues that equipment "always is *in terms of* its belonging to other equipment".⁴⁶ The things of the world that we use only have meaning for us in relation to other things, and all these things of the world exist in a cultural and historical specificity. Equipment *is as* something else; equipment is *revealed* in the context of other things. Generally, we are unaware of this relational constitution of things: it is an ontological characteristic with which we need not concern ourselves during the regular course of daily life. However, this relational constitution sometimes makes itself known, as when a hammer that we are using breaks.⁴⁷ This event can bring

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 68.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 69.

us into a consideration of the relational web in which we are embedded, or through which we *are*, since the event encourages us to think about what it is that we are using the hammer *for*. Goodstein might still object that the “relational web” through which equipment derives its sense is an empty, transcendental ontological signifier, imbued with no more cultural or historical significance than Being-towards-death, but I would argue that the relational structure itself suggests that Heidegger cannot understand Being in anything *but* cultural and historical terms (as I point out above), and that the way that equipment reveals itself is contingent on the self-revelation of Being, which itself changes with history. The exact meaning of the second point should become clear upon a closer reading of the concept of ontotheology carried out in the second part of this chapter.

If Goodstein’s criticisms of Heidegger’s transhistoricism do not stand up to criticism – if, in other words, I can show that Heidegger’s conception of ontology is not a transcendental one – then it makes sense to take his analytical approach to boredom seriously. More than that, I would argue that Heidegger’s approach is important because of his ontological understanding of technology (or equipment, or media). This focus is one of the main reasons that I turn to Heidegger rather than Goodstein in order to understand the boredom of social media: historically delimited discursive practices (i.e. the rhetoric of reflection on subjectivity) do indeed determine who we are and how we think about ourselves – they determine our boredom, and boredom reveals their character – but these discourses or practices themselves depend on the media particular to the age. Goodstein understands that there is a connection between technology, discourse, and

boredom, of course,⁴⁸ but she does not ascribe an ontological significance to it; she in fact shies away from all characterizations of worldly phenomena as ontological, worrying that this characterization can obscure their discursive character. This is a reasonable concern, but I think that there is much to be derived from a direct confrontation with ontological questions. If the world presents itself ontologically – if it *seems* as though there were no outside to this particular culture, or this particular history – then it behooves us to address the reasons for this presentation.

All of this, however, turns on establishing the historical character of Heidegger's conception of ontology. Given the rigour of Goodstein's approach, I need to explain why Heidegger's approach is the most appropriate one for investigating the boredom that sinks into us on the net before explaining the background for his analysis. Why turn to Heidegger, who criticizes the forerunners of the sort of cultural study that concerns itself with mass media, and for whom thinking must be broad rather than narrow? How can Heidegger, who sometimes seems unconcerned with specifics, help in understanding the specific boredom associated with the net?⁴⁹ It is to the historical character of his conception of ontology that I now turn.

1.2: Ambiguities

⁴⁸ See, for instance, her reading of Wolfgang Schivelbusch (*Experience without Qualities*, 176).

⁴⁹ This kind of criticism is regularly levelled at Heidegger and those that pursue a Heideggerian analysis of technology. For an excellent introduction to the debate, see *Inquiry* 43.2 (2000), where David Stump and Iain Thomson pose challenges to Andrew Feenberg's reading of Heidegger (Stump, "Socially Constructed Technology": 217-24; Thomson, "From the Question Concerning Technology to the Quest for a Democratic Technology: Heidegger, Marcuse, Feenberg": 203-15; Feenberg, "Constructivism and Technology Critique: Replies to Critics": 225-37). See also Feenberg's *Questioning Technology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999).

Understanding boredom in its specificity can help us understand the context, whatever its nature, in which particular boredoms arise. Additionally, understanding this broader context is vital if specific analyses are to be meaningful – that is, if they are to have implications beyond their limited scope. Understanding how and why people grow bored in the course of aimlessly browsing the web is certainly useful on its own, but it takes on further meaning when it reaches into other spheres. For instance, while the analysis of digital boredom might be profitable for advertisers, game designers, psychologists of addiction, internet policy makers, and so on when considered in a limited fashion, it would not necessarily have anything to say about closely related fields, like media that appear to engage rather than bore, or to apparently unrelated fields. However, when boredom is solidly situated in a context, the links between it and other phenomena, directly related or not, can proliferate. And when this context is deepened, the strength of these links is revealed.

Heidegger takes an approach that is both highly specific and radically contextual in just this way – one that is ultimately more concerned with the relation between the specific and the contextual than with the relation – and in doing so, he provides the best starting point for an analysis of virtual boredom. This is clearest from the final sections of *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* on boredom, where he argues that his analysis needs to be situated in the present, focusing on “contemporary Dasein”.⁵⁰

Heidegger makes this argument not because he wants to come to a final conclusion about boredom as it might manifest in his day, but because he is interested in its “essence”.

This division of the analysis into boredom’s manifestation and its essence does not imply

⁵⁰ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeil and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 160-62.

a Platonic claim to the effect that any individual boredom is only a copy of the true form of boredom, and that our thinking must direct itself toward this form. Rather, it suggests that this essence of boredom *depends on* the way that it manifests itself to us here and now, or that an analysis of particular boredoms can readily lend itself to a broader analysis of essences. Heidegger's approach to boredom will therefore have explanatory power for the readily apparent phenomena associated with the mood – things like watch checking or browser refreshing – and for its essence.

The meaning of this claim concerning “essence” will not be perfectly clear at this stage. In order to prepare the way for an understanding of this claim, I want to turn to the meaning of ontological historicity and its implications for boredom and metaphysics (as ambiguous) – and *this* will not be clear without first explaining how Heidegger understands philosophy broadly speaking. My explanation therefore begins with Heidegger's understanding of philosophy and metaphysics as it is articulated in the “Preliminary Appraisal” in *The Fundamental Concepts*. Following this, I turn to Thomson's interpretation of his later work for the clearest guide to the twin ideas of ontological historicity and ontotheology. I then return to the work on boredom in order to show how, even thirty years earlier, Heidegger's work is thoroughly historical – and, as such, ambiguous in the same way as boredom considered as an attunement.

The Essential Ambiguity of Philosophy

Philosophy is neither a worldview nor a science, Heidegger claims, nor is it something that can be productively compared to art or religion; philosophy “*can be*

determined only from out of itself and as itself'.⁵¹ Taking this non-comparative approach helps Heidegger demonstrate that philosophy is different from metaphysics, which always has reference to a ground outside of itself. It also demonstrates that philosophy, though determined from out of itself, is necessarily historical, or bound by genealogical ties to a complex context.⁵² I want to argue that the same is true of boredom, and that philosophy and boredom are linked in their ambiguity. In order to make this claim, I trace Heidegger's etymological discussion of the non-ambiguous term of metaphysics, showing how it came to stand in for the highly ambiguous term of philosophy. Before this, however, I outline Heidegger's view of philosophy in more detail in order to explain the different grounds on which philosophy and metaphysics stand.

Philosophy is a distinctively human activity – something that is *done* – that has “withdrawn” into “the essence of man”.⁵³ The philosopher, as someone who philosophizes, finds herself “gripped” by concepts like world, finitude, and solitude⁵⁴ that seem to be essential; she does not “investigate” these concepts so much as she lets them “take hold” of her. But this taking hold, Heidegger suggests, only happens given a particular attunement of Dasein that Heidegger calls fundamental.⁵⁵ A “fundamental attunement” is a sort of base mood or orientation that puts Dasein into contact with or

⁵¹ Ibid, 1-2.

⁵² The phenomenological method does not downplay the importance of history as such – just the opposite. See Stuart Elden, “Reading Genealogy as Historical Ontology,” in *Foucault/Heidegger: Critical Encounters*, ed. Alan Milchman and Alan Rosenberg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 187-205.

⁵³ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 4.

⁵⁴ “World” is that within which we long to be; “finitude” is being both not-here and not-there (in a spatial sense) and not-a-whole (in a temporal sense); and “solitude” is the non-individualistic state that is necessary for philosophizing. All three are necessarily linked (Ibid, 5-6).

⁵⁵ Ibid, 5-7.

readiness for philosophical questions.⁵⁶ While philosophy and metaphysics converge in that they both necessarily occur “within human Dasein”, philosophy differs from metaphysics in terms of attunement: where philosophy is grounded in a fundamental attunement that readies Dasein for questioning, metaphysics is grounded in an attunement that readies the subject for answering. This is clear from the difference between the way that philosophy and metaphysics view the relationship between the thinker and the thing that is thought: philosophy does not set a concept before a subject as an object of study, but places this “subject” into question, making what was once a solid ground for acting in the world something uncertain that will cause a questioning of the world itself as well. Metaphysics does the opposite, laying out an object for study and deriving some conclusion about it that is more or less certain.⁵⁷ The scientific approach, for which logic and provability are paramount, is analogous to the metaphysical one in that both drive toward this certainty. In contrast, philosophy is not essentially logical and its conclusions cannot be proven; rather, it is ambiguous.⁵⁸ And this ambiguity, furthermore, is not something with the neutral character of a property that might be uncovered and examined, but is instead something that seems “hopeless” and “terrifying”: the philosophy that pulls the ground out from under the subject is something that truly terrifies the subject. This terror of philosophy is existential: “*in philosophizing the Dasein in man launches the attack upon man*”. This is not tautological, since “Dasein” and “man” are not the same thing: “man” functions in a Cartesian sense as an absolutely

⁵⁶ The word “fundamental” does not imply that there is one single attunement that would make Dasein ready for philosophy, like anxiety or boredom, but that any attunement that awakens questions about world, finitude, solitude, and other philosophical questions should be considered fundamental.

⁵⁷ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 17.

certain ground, while Dasein, separated by a hyphen into “*Da*” and “*Sein*” in order to call attention to its existential constitution, functions “essentially”. The *essence* of Dasein involves this attack that renders ambiguous.⁵⁹

Heidegger substantiates this division of philosophy and metaphysics by turning to a genealogical and etymological study of the word “metaphysics” beginning from the earliest period of Greek thought, when the term had not yet been formed. I describe some of the details of this study in order to demonstrate the ontotheological, and thus historically grounded, character of *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, which would not otherwise be evident.

Heidegger’s study begins etymologically: originally, “metaphysics” was separated out into “physics” and “nature”. The latter is usually understood in terms of growth, but should be understood as “prevailing”, Heidegger claims: nature or physis (*φύσις*) is “this whole prevailing that prevails through man himself”.⁶⁰ In so rendering physis, Heidegger writes “man” into the concept; he sees an original unity of the human and the natural. With time, prevailing “comes to be spoken out” in the logos. This speaking of prevailing is not some trait that is appended to prevailing, but belongs to it: revealing is contained within the logos of prevailing. At the same time, however, prevailing comes to be concealed. The logos, in revealing prevailing, renders it concealed. Logos, which thus comes in some sense “after” concealment despite being its occasion of inception, therefore means “‘taking out of concealment’, *revealing*”. Physis as prevailing, then, strives at the same time toward concealing and revealing in its articulation as logos.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid, 21.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 25-26.

⁶¹ Ibid, 26-27.

But prevailing prevails through the human, and the human has a distinct role to play: the human strives toward truth as *unconcealment* or *aletheia*:

In truth beings are torn from concealment. Truth is understood by the Greeks as something stolen, something that must be torn from concealment in a confrontation in which precisely *φύσις* strives to conceal itself. Truth is innermost confrontation of the essence of man with the whole of beings themselves.⁶²

Truth, then, as something stolen, *requires human action*. The human must speak logos from its experience, thereby “making it manifest”.⁶³

Heidegger turns from this account of early Greek thought to a slightly later period in which *physis* is redefined as not only that which prevails, but as “the *prevailing* of whatever prevails” as well. *Physis* now also means that which is self-sustaining on its own, without human intervention – something closer to the common current conception of the natural as something radically distinct from the human. This redefinition turns *physis* into a “regional concept” that applies to a particular region of beings: *physis* now refers not only to a *whole* prevailing that includes the human, but to *the prevailing* of whatever prevails. In other words, *physis* stops referring to Being exclusively and starts referring to nature as well, and, in the process, begins to eclipse Being – a process that will intensify as Being withdraws. At the same time, *physis* is not limited to referring to a particular region (i.e. nature): it is “equiprimordially” that “which lets everything that prevails be as that which it is”. In this sense, *physis* is not a *region* of beings, “but the *nature of beings*. Nature now has the meaning of *innermost essence*”. *Physis*, then, is simultaneously a regional concept and that which is essential. Neither of these concepts suppresses the other; each “continue[s] alongside” the other. Heidegger understands this

⁶² Ibid, 27-28.

⁶³ Ibid, 29.

equiprimordial character to be essential to the philosophical conception of physis: “*both meanings... express something equally essential and therefore persist in... philosophy*”; both meanings, articulated together, express the *ambiguity* of physis.⁶⁴

This analysis of the early Greek understanding of the ambiguity of physis is vital for understanding how Heidegger’s writings relate to one another across decades and, more importantly, for understanding the connection between philosophy and boredom. Already Heidegger has conveyed the sense that this early understanding of physis, ambiguous as it is, speaks to philosophy, or gives an indication of philosophy, in a way that the metaphysics of the Western canon cannot. Heidegger aims to bring the philosophical ambiguity of this understanding of physis back into discourse – to let it show through the (modern) metaphysical pre-understanding of the world as a series of propositions and problems. He wants to talk about an alternative to modern metaphysics – not about “metaphysics” as such, but about what remains philosophical in it. Boredom, it will soon become evident, is supposed to fit into, even exemplify, the ambiguity of philosophy, thereby showing something of this alternative. It is, then, less tied to Heidegger’s early work, in which it might be argued that a static conception of Being or Dasein is at work (although this would be problematic), than to the later work, in which Being and Dasein are explicitly historicized. The analysis of physis partially exemplifies the doctrine of ontological historicity. Before returning to this analysis, I want to clarify what this term means.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 30-31.

Ontological Historicity and the Clarity of Metaphysics

Heidegger's thought is sometimes divided into an early and a late period, with the later work being characterized by an historical turn,⁶⁵ but this division is untenable: Heidegger's ontological concerns were always historical to at least some extent. Critics that assail his work, even his earliest work, with accusations of foundationalism are missing a number of different clues. This is understandable: it is easy to read something like the discussion of "primitives" in the introduction to *Being and Time* in Orientalist-foundationalist terms when it is framed in purely ontological terms. When ontology is understood as always already historical, however, passages like that one, and like many others from *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* to which I will return over the course of the chapter, become clear references to ways of thinking and doing that operate according to radically non-Western premises.

It is vital, then, to establish that sort of historical framework on Heidegger's work in order to avoid reading the work on boredom in terms of a *fundamentalist* ontology. Although this framework finds itself under deliberate construction in the 1930s, it is laid out most clearly and completely in the work of the 1950s and 1960s, particularly in *Identity and Difference*, which collects two important essays from 1957 on ontology and

⁶⁵ The work that culminates in *Being and Time* and carries into the lectures of the late 1920s is said to be grounded on an untenable faith in Being as such – an absolute ontological ground that is, in its structure, no different than any other ground in the history of philosophy. This ground gives rise to an equally familiar characterization of the human as subject, ultimately concerned only with itself, wherein the characteristics of Dasein that would mark it as something non-subjective (its thrownness and withness) are far less important than those that mark it as subjective (its Being-towards-death). The later work, by contrast, is said to have turned away from the mistakes of *Being and Time*, and to exemplify a real attempt at breaking free from the usual strictures of philosophy: Heidegger tries to *think* rather than to "philosophize", turning his focus from fundamental ontology to something more historical, and from the human to the event of *Ereignis*. Following Reiner Schürmann's *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, trans. Christine-Marie Gros (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), we might also add a third period to Heidegger's thought, considering his work of the 1960s in terms of a topology of Being. The work of the 1960s is largely beyond the scope of this dissertation, or of the claims I advance with regard to the historical character of ontology.

metaphysics, and in the 1955 lecture called “What Is Metaphysics?” In order to make this discussion as succinct and clear as possible (and therefore as directed to the question of the ambiguity of boredom as possible), I follow Thomson’s concise exegesis in *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education*.⁶⁶ Thomson begins by establishing a baseline understanding of ontological historicity, and then substantiates it by explaining how different ontologico-historical epochs become concretized according to a common metaphysical onto-theo-logic.

Thomson begins his reading by arguing that Heidegger presupposes “that our ontological bedrock is temporally variable”: “even humanity’s most fundamental sense of reality changes, and so needs to be understood in terms of its history”. Although Thomson thinks that this was not apparent during the 1920s, Heidegger’s “later” thought is clearly founded on a “doctrine of *ontological historicity*” that holds “that there is no... substantive, transhistorically binding fundamental ontology”.⁶⁷ Even though this absolute ontological ground does not exist, it often seems as though it does because of the way that metaphysics shapes our ontological presuppositions: the systematic way in which we think about entities in fact determines what our presuppositions are.⁶⁸ The metaphysical character of most thinking is exemplified in the always-circumscribed process of questioning, or the way that questions specify the scope and nature of their answers. The circumscribed question of metaphysics, as one that seems to extend over beings as a whole, is particularly important. In asking what an entity is, Heidegger says,

⁶⁶ “Ontological historicity” can be rendered “historical ontology” without altering its meaning substantially. For an excellent account of this “doctrine” that opts for the second wording, see Elden, “Reading Genealogy as Historical Ontology.”

⁶⁷ Iain Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education* (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 9-10.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

metaphysics claims that *being* is what it means for an entity “to be”. Heidegger, however, asserts that the being of metaphysics refers only to “the being of entities”, not to Being as such. Asking about (what) entities (are) presupposes an understanding of Being – namely, that it *is*.⁶⁹

This presupposition regarding the being of entities is perennial; it modulates itself in different epochs at an ultimately artificial level. Heidegger identifies it as both ontological, referring to a ground, and theological, referring to a justification. The presumption-answers to (the question of) metaphysics can be identified as *ontotheological* because of the way that metaphysics asks its question. When metaphysics asks, “What *is* an entity?”, it is asking after both “*what* makes an entity an entity ... [and] about the way *that* an entity is an entity”. This split can be thought in terms of the split between whatness and thatness, or essence and existence.⁷⁰ The metaphysical question makes both ontological and theological presumptions in its very structure. Ontology here asks the question, “What is an entity as an entity?” In asking this question, metaphysics searches for the common ground of entities, and thus acts ontologically. Theology asks “*Which* entity is the highest (or supreme) entity, and in what sense *is* it?” When looking for the *totality* of entities with regard to the “all-founding entity” (God), metaphysics thus acts theologically.⁷¹

In addition to thinking Heidegger’s division of metaphysics into ontology and theology in terms of questions, it can also be conceived functionally, in terms of grounding. “To ground” has both ontological and theological senses. Ontologically, it

⁶⁹ Ibid, 11-12.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 12. These Greek dichotomizations of metaphysics are mirrored in every other epoch; Thomson lists some of them on 16.

⁷¹ Ibid, 14-15.

means “‘giving the ground’ to entities”, or setting up a bedrock for them. Theologically, it means “founding” entities, or establishing the source from which they issue “and by which they can subsequently be ‘justified’”. When metaphysics employs the double-grounding ontotheological move, then, it engages in a two-way justification: the intelligible order of things is ontologically grounded “from inside out” at the same time as it is theologically founded “from the outside in”. Being is thus secured as the being of entities, not as Being, “from *both* the inside out *and* the outside in”.⁷²

Though this doubly-secured metaphysics often seems impregnable, Thomson argues that its ontotheological ground is weak because it has no effective answer to the question of what grounds the being of entities: it only has the double justification, which is ultimately circular. By employing this circular justification, metaphysics suggests that entities are self-grounding; it claims that it has access to an immanent truth, and that its claims are therefore legitimate. Heidegger prefers another explanation – that what ultimately grounds the being of entities is something beyond the being of entities, or Being as such. Being as such makes “metaphysics’ various epochal postulates of the being of entities” possible, but it does not ontotheologically ground them. Metaphysics is neither a primal foundation (*Ur-grund*) nor an unstable abyss (*Ab-grund*); rather, *metaphysics provides the appearance of a ground* – an *Un-grund* – for various epochal postulates. Our “understanding of the being of entities [is thus] epistemically ‘suspended’ between foundation and abyss” for the duration of an epoch. Metaphysics suspends thinking between the *Ur-grund* and the *Ab-grund*, preventing it from moving beyond this ontotheological bind. In other words, each metaphysical epoch holds back

⁷² Ibid, 17-19.

ontological historicity, establishing what appears to be a solid ground for thinking and doing.⁷³

The Ontotheological Character of the Lecture on Boredom

Is there an ontotheological critique of metaphysics in the preamble to the discussion of boredom in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*? I argue that there is, and that this is clear from the generalized discussion of physis above and from the more specific discussions of Aristotle's Prime Mover and of Suarez' interpretation of Aristotle's claims. Aristotle provides philosophy with the first thoroughly ontotheological metaphysics, and Suarez' interpretation provides the foundation for modern metaphysics.

Originally, philosophy includes all fields of study in its purview, including the sciences, and the sciences, for their part, are different in early Greek times than they are now: natural science is both a method for gathering information about the things in the world and a means for making claims about the nature of that world.⁷⁴ This equiprimordial character of science and philosophy wherein the ambiguity of philosophy nevertheless remains paramount gradually changes with Thales, Anaximander, Plato, and Aristotle. Aristotle's areas of study are part of, and can be explained by, natural science. When all beings are included in natural science, Being also becomes integrated, and the ambiguity of physis is lost: physis comes to refer to nature alone instead of both nature

⁷³ Ibid, 19-20.

⁷⁴ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 32. On the mutual dependency of methodology and ontology in both Greek times and Christian ones, see Michael B. Foster, "The Christian Doctrine of Creation and the Rise of Modern Natural Science," *Mind* 43 (1934): 446-68. Foster's argument is surprisingly similar to Heidegger's, though it comes from a seemingly different point of view.

and Being, and “man” is no longer essentially included in the prevailing of whatever prevails. These “ontological” areas of study, i.e. those which operate at a physical level and pertain to physis understood as nature, are supplemented by a “theological” explanation as well: the Prime Mover is understood within the terms of natural science. Questions asked “concerning beings as a whole” refer not only to nature but also to “the divine”, i.e. the essentiality of beings, and the physical sciences are assigned to explaining them.⁷⁵

With Aristotle, then, physis is defined in two new ways: “firstly *φύσις* as beings as a whole, and secondly *φύσις* in the sense of *οὐσία*, the essentiality of beings as such”. This two-way definition of physis is very different from the earlier Greek understanding:

What is decisive is that these two orientations of questioning, contained in the unitary meaning of *φύσις*, are explicitly amalgamated by Aristotle. There are not two different disciplines; rather he designates questioning concerning beings as a whole and questioning concerning what the being of beings, their essence, their nature is... as First Philosophy. Such questioning is philosophizing of the first order, philosophizing proper.⁷⁶

These two senses of physis, conjoined in First Philosophy, limit the possibility of any conception of Being as such. The only acceptable understandings of physis are, first, “beings as they are accessible in physics”, and, second, “as nature, just as we use this expression today whenever we speak of the nature of the matter”.⁷⁷ These are both eminently clear, practical, and ends-oriented understandings of physis, and hence of philosophy.

Heidegger intends his reading of Aristotle to be a specific critique of the metaphysics that Aristotle instantiates *as ontotheological* rather than some critique of

⁷⁵ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 32-33.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 33.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, 34.

metaphysics in general, even if he does not employ that language explicitly. This can be understood in the context of the loss of the ambiguity once inherent to metaphysics.

When Heidegger suggests that Aristotle splits *physis* into beings on the one hand and the essentiality of those beings on the other, he shows that First Philosophy removes the ambiguity once inherent to *physis* in two ways. First, the dual meaning of *physis* (as prevailing and as the prevailing of whatever prevails) is rendered now in terms of the existence of beings and the essence of beings. Second, in this rendering, the former equiprimordial character of prevailing and the prevailing of whatever prevails is lost, with one of the new meanings (existence) taking primacy over the other (essence). However, this primacy is only apparent: Greek science, which purports to explain the changing of things in the world, depends on a particular conception of the nature of the world, and the Greek conception of the world, which presumes that essence cannot change but existence can, depends in turn on the legitimating function played by science's provision of evidence regarding the world. This is ontotheological in that the conception of the world, as one divided into essence and existence, ontologically *grounds* the methods of natural science at the same time that science, operating according to the logic of the four causes, theologically *justifies* this division of the world. The ontotheological character of Aristotle's metaphysics is therefore circular, but by no means ambiguous: the justifying role played by theology (science, essence, thatness, entities as a whole) is divided clearly from and subordinated to the grounding role played by ontology (world, existence, whatness, entities as such).⁷⁸

⁷⁸ For a clearer exploration of the ontotheological character of Aristotle's metaphysics, see Martin Heidegger, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. William Kluback and Jean T. Wilde (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1958), 55-63, and Martin Heidegger, *The End of Philosophy*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 4-8. See also Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, 32-36.

Heidegger's interpretation of Franz Suarez provides further evidence of the presence of the ontotheological critique in the preamble to the analysis of boredom. Heidegger claims that Suarez, one of the last of the scholastic philosophers, influences the shape of modern metaphysics through his recapitulation and re-imagination of Aristotle's metaphysics. More specifically, Heidegger claims that Suarez lays the groundwork for Kant's critical philosophy and for "the fundamental character of modern metaphysics" as such. This character, Heidegger writes, "is determined by the fact that the entirety of the traditional [Aristotelian] problematic comes under the aspect of a new science, which is represented by mathematical natural science". In the ascension of modern science to a nearly divine status, the dual character of physis familiar from Aristotle – its split into beings and the essentiality of those beings – becomes subsumed to the search for an "absolute certainty" that will eliminate all traces of ambiguity. This certainty is founded on the I familiar from Descartes and Fichte – the I that "is precisely not put in question". The I is more than just unquestioned, however: its certainty lets it act as "the most secure and unquestioned foundation of this metaphysics".⁷⁹ With Suarez, science becomes metaphysics' justifying theology, and the I becomes its unshakable ground. This early line of analysis links mathematical natural science, as technological, into the critique of metaphysics, and strongly prefigures both the structure of the ontotheological critique and the centrality that it accords to technology.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 51-55.

⁸⁰ Heidegger explains the vital role played by technology in modern metaphysics in the two lectures from *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

The Ambiguity of Attunement

Heidegger's history of philosophy tells of the elimination of ambiguity. With Parmenides and Heraclitus, the meaning of physis (and Being) is ambiguous and nonfoundational. Thales and Anaximander begin to divide physis into an ontological ground (water is the universal entity) and a theological justification (the first principle is an indefinite mass), and Plato further concretizes this division through the theory of the forms. Aristotle inverts Plato's theory, emphasizing existence over essence and thereby writing Being into nature. Suarez, Descartes, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel further reify the existence/essence divide, progressively disavowing "essence" and putting a supposedly objective science in its place. Although all of these philosophers employ different terms and construct different philosophical systems,⁸¹ they all philosophize within the disambiguating, ontotheological strictures of metaphysics.

How, then, to do other than philosophize metaphysically? Heidegger finds his answer in an alternative to metaphysics wherein physis might be again conceived as the "whole prevailing that prevails *through man himself*" – i.e., a philosophy that begins from Dasein. This is what Heidegger aims at when he suggests that we need to "ascertain" or "awaken" a fundamental attunement – not uncover or determine it as an object of study for man, but *let* "whatever is sleeping", i.e. sleeping "in" Dasein, "*become wakeful*"; not render it present, but permit its simultaneous presence/absence to remain uncertain. It is in this uncertainty that attunement might remain outside of the consciousness and reason that have come to characterize the modern subject. In attempting to think without

⁸¹ See Thomson, *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, 16 for a quick comparative break down of different ontotheological terms over the history of philosophy.

reference to metaphysics by way of a fundamental attunement, then, Heidegger aims at “a complete transformation of our conception of man” from something that acts as a ground for the questioning of a world to something that presumes a world and puts itself into question.⁸²

Attunement can unsettle the stability of the conception of the human because it implies the being-together of entities characteristic of Dasein. When a mood settles, it cannot be localized in one person or another, nor in some event or object; instead, it “imposes itself on everything” equally. Consider the example of a friend overcome by grief: nothing changes in what or how we act, but “the *way* in which we are together is different”; “in such an attunement this human being is inaccessible”. The language here is important: my grieving friend is *in* the attunement of grief. The attunement is neither inside nor outside of us nor anything else. As something neither inside nor outside, “attunements are... precisely a fundamental manner and fundamental way of being, indeed of being-there”. Attunement “is” ambiguously “part” of Dasein; Dasein only ever expresses itself “in” an attunement; we cannot speak of Dasein without also speaking of attunement.⁸³

Now, there are different attunements – Heidegger has so far mentioned grief, boredom, and (in *Being and Time*) anxiety – and they have different degrees of purchase. It is “precisely *those* attunements to which we pay no heed at all... which attune us in such a way that we feel as though there is no attunement there at all”. These attunements are “powerful” in that they have the greatest potential for opening Dasein onto philosophical questioning. In the most powerful attunements – and Heidegger will argue

⁸² Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 59-62.

⁸³ *Ibid*, 66-67.

that boredom is chief among them – “we feel as though there is no attunement there at all”.⁸⁴

Consider the invisibility of attunement during periods of distraction. When I’m aimlessly browsing, I’m not doing anything in particular, or paying special attention to one thing over another; even though I may find myself interested in something, that interest always passes quickly over from that first thing to something else.⁸⁵ When I stop browsing and actively consider the question of what I was experiencing, I find that I’m hard pressed to give a description. The adjective “interesting” is the only one that comes readily to mind, and it indicates nothing in particular: the net usually isn’t depressing, uplifting, or compelling in any other fashion, and I know this in reflection, but saying what it’s *not* doesn’t help me describe what it *is*. In grief, I could readily identify the attunement: it was something that oppresses, rends, makes inconsolable; it was felt physically in me, and I saw it in you. The attunement in distraction, on the other hand, doesn’t seem to “do” anything, which means that it generates no telltale signs. I can’t identify it, and most of the time it wouldn’t even occur to me to try. If there is an attunement at work in distraction, then – and Heidegger claims that Dasein must always be in an attunement⁸⁶ – it would seem to be of the invisible, powerful kind.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Ibid, 68.

⁸⁵ Svendsen notes that boredom is connected with “desire”, and that “desire is a desire for sensory *stimuli*” – the “only ‘interesting’ thing” (*A Philosophy of Boredom*, 27). Svendsen goes on to note that Heidegger observed this connection between boredom and interesting things as well: “today’s interest is only directed towards the *interesting*, and the interesting is what only a moment later one finds indifferent or boring” (Ibid, 28).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ William Bogard also discusses distraction, not in the terms of interest and boredom but those of escape and capture, and demonstrates how they lead to particular configurations of power (“Distraction and Digital Culture,” in *Life in the Wires: The CTheory Reader*, eds. Arthur Kroker and Marilouise Kroker, 443-60 (Victoria, Canada: New World Perspectives and CTheory Books, 2004)). Although his analysis resembles mine in many ways, it does not entertain the idea that distraction might function ontologically.

This example is the kind of thing that gets analyzed in cultural theory more often than philosophy, and both Heidegger and Goodstein would take issue with it. For Goodstein, as I noted earlier, sociological studies often fail to appreciate the broader philosophical significance of moods, and both sociological and philosophical studies routinely find themselves trapped in a rhetoric of reflection of which they are not aware. The idea that I am in an attunement characterized principally by distraction when I browse the net could certainly fall into this kind of criticism: at the least, the language that I am using here presupposes the sort of non-distracted subject that I should be. Even if my reading holds some explanatory power, the mere fact of it suggests something more significant about my presuppositions about subjectivity. Heidegger's criticism is similar. He suggests that the philosophers of culture⁸⁸ may provide perfectly accurate diagnoses of the times, but that these diagnoses take us "through and beyond world history at a single stroke": they *determine* "where we are" as something *sensational*. The claims of the philosophers of culture are "exciting" and "interesting": we see something familiar in them, and it resonates with how we have come to understand ourselves. But neither the diagnoses nor the prognoses of the cultural theorists "bind" us; their arguments enter into our consciousness and we turn them around a little, but then we move onto something else. Although Heidegger could be discussing claims like mine that target some specific instance or behaviour, he is more concerned with those broad philosophers of culture that

⁸⁸ Heidegger discusses Oswald Spengler, Ludwig Klages, Max Scheler, and Leopold Ziegler specifically. Although it is far from fair to use Spengler and the others as representatives of cultural theory today, especially given the reactionary nature of and sweeping claims made by three of Heidegger's authors and the progressive nature of and restricted claims made by contemporary cultural theorists, it may well be fair to say that many people still believe that they have a role to play in the world history of which Spengler, Klages, and Ziegler wrote, and that they believe so on the basis of a long inheritance dating back to the Enlightenment. Just because some philosophers of culture have shaken off globe-changing assumptions does not at all mean that mainstream institutions or people have done so. Heidegger's analysis here, even restricted to early 20th century German theorists, still has purchase.

make world-historical claims, since these claims “do not involve us, they *do not attack us*” in the sense of provoking a philosophical awakening. “On the contrary, they release us from ourselves and present us to ourselves in a world-historical situation and role” in which we can have no existential involvement. In focusing our attention on situations and roles are so far removed from our realm of concern that they address the world or history as a whole, the claims of the philosophers of culture make us *interesting* to ourselves: they take “us” out of our “selves”, which is to say out of our Dasein, and place us into a constructed idea of culture that cannot “grip” us in the same manner as thought.⁸⁹

The implication of the failure of this analysis to grip us is twofold. First, our obsession with “giv[ing] ourselves this [world historical] role” indicates that “we [have] become too *insignificant* to ourselves”. We are insignificant; we are unimportant; there is nothing in us that provokes wonder. One of the ways that we know we can become significant is to construct for ourselves a world historical role. Second, this obsession with the world-historical indicates that “an *indifference* yawns at us out of all things, an

⁸⁹ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 74-76. Goodstein and Heidegger make very similar arguments here, as both point to the significance of what the diagnoses of culture imply over the content of the diagnoses themselves. Additionally, they both suggest that it is vital to consider, in a way that Goodstein’s “philosophers” or Heidegger’s “philosophers of culture” do not, the cultural-historical context that generates these diagnoses in the terms that would explain how these diagnoses have arisen. In Heidegger’s terms, before we can understand “how things stand with us”, we need to understand *where* they stand. This does not mean that we need to do what the philosophers of culture do, but that we simply note “*that there are these interpretations...* and that they determine our existence [*Dasein*] in many ways, even if we cannot say precisely how” (Ibid, 76-77). This demonstrates that Heidegger is in fact concerned with Goodstein’s rhetoric of reflection – with the simple fact that interpretations exist. More significantly, though, it also demonstrates the different focuses that arise from the methodological differences between the two writers. Where Goodstein focuses on the details of how the rhetoric of reflection works in order to explain the significance of its philosophical and sociological assumptions and conclusions, Heidegger notes only the fact of the rhetoric itself, not its details, in order to make a statement concerning Dasein. They are interpreting the same phenomenon of boredom, but with different ends, and accordingly different methodologies, in mind: Goodstein’s interest in textual detail leads her to a rhetorical-critical analysis, while Heidegger’s interest in existence leads him to phenomenology – but to a phenomenology that makes historical assumptions about ontology.

indifference whose grounds we do not know”.⁹⁰ Although the world is full of innovation and objects of interest, we find them insignificant and ourselves indifferent to them. Again, the world-historical, which is by definition significant and interesting, provides us with an answer to this problem. Both of these implications suggest that there is something – an unacknowledged ground on which we stand, and in which we are attuned – that gives rise to them. The continual ease with which we continue to accept world-historical claims on the one hand and to fixate on petty items of interest on the other demonstrates that this grounding attunement is both well hidden and powerful.

Again, the point in identifying the existence of an attunement that is giving rise to a fixation with the interesting is not to describe the character of that attunement or to typologize it somehow, thereby removing the ambiguity inherent to it, but to let it become wakeful, to put it in Heidegger’s terms. Understanding all of the nuances of the attunement characteristic to the world-historical or the interesting would render that which is a concern for thought – that is, something that is inherently connected to Dasein, or something in which Dasein is, or something that makes possible Da-sein – an object that stands outside of it. In tracing Heidegger’s thinking from a basis in ontological historicity and ontotheology through to an understanding of attunement as the ambiguous ground out of which a non-ambiguous understanding of the world as interesting arises, I have demonstrated the importance of letting attunement remain ambiguous while also indicating the importance of considering the specific instances in which that attunement can be made visible. It is not enough to think about one particular boring thing, or about the social context in which that thing bores, or about how it is more boring now than it

⁹⁰ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 77.

was a century ago; it is also not enough to suggest that there might be some trans-historical essence of boredom from which humanity cannot escape. Heidegger's claim is that the particular and the essential inflect one another from out of an ontotheological ground that takes its character from the history of metaphysics – that the ontological appears as such because metaphysics requires ontology. When the particular and the essential interact on this foundationalist basis, the particular seems to have been generated by the essential, and the essential takes on the character of an essence. Heidegger's further claim, however, is that Dasein, although still subject to the sway of metaphysics, makes possible the imagining of a thinking other than the metaphysical. Coming to boredom by way of the attunement of Dasein opens thinking onto ambiguous grounds. The analysis that follows is intended to uncover the ambiguity that *should*, but may not, be inherent in several different instances of boredom.

Chapter Two: Forms of Boredom

In the previous chapter, I reviewed the literature on boredom in order to highlight boredom's historical character, show how its analysis has generally been split into a philosophical and a sociological type, and argue that this illustrates a modern obsession with a certain kind of reflexive subjectivity. Although I followed Goodstein this far, I disagreed with her characterization of Heidegger's phenomenological account of boredom as a merely "philosophical" one, instead arguing that it in fact has the potential to deepen Goodstein's already complex understanding of the mood. I then turned to the metaphysical background of Heidegger's argument in order to show how this works, arguing that boredom alternately displays both the same ambiguity as thinking and the same clarity as metaphysics, or that it is tied to the onto-theo-logic of the epoch. I demonstrated this by explaining how the focus on boredom in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* is founded on a critique of metaphysics as ontotheology, and how the important concept of attunement, which can show us alternatives to this sort of metaphysics, must be understood in these terms. In this chapter, I will extend that analysis of attunement, focusing of course on boredom.

Heidegger's analysis of boredom moves through three progressively "profound" stages, and my own analysis mirrors his. I *begin* with Heidegger, focusing first on the experience of passing the time, but I substitute my examples in place of his. In doing so, I follow his method while providing the historical specificity that a historico-ontological take on phenomenology requires. My basic claim is that the boredom associated with the net maps more closely onto what Heidegger calls the second form of boredom than onto

the first or the third: when we go online, we tend to escape from the tedium of being bored *by* some particular situation (this is the first form of boredom), but we do not tend to enter into a state wherein our boredom is so severe that we would lose our subjective, agential purchase on the world (the third form of boredom). Instead, we tend to absently while away our time *with* interesting things. In the first section, I demonstrate that, in virtual boredom, I am not bored by particular things. I begin by describing the behaviour that is most characteristic of this form of boredom, passing the time, and then describe how this behaviour implies two important structures, emptiness and limbo. In the second section, I show how passing the time can take place even in apparently engaging situations, and I argue that virtual boredom is apparent in this form's emptiness and limbo. In the third section, I explain why Heidegger's claims regarding profound boredom are important before demonstrating that this type is dissimilar from what we can see online.

2.1: The First Side of Passing the Time: Being Bored

Driving Boredom Away

Boredom should be driven away. No one wants to become bored, but if it happens, we try to “cause it to *fall asleep*”. This is a temporary solution: boredom will awaken again. Boredom therefore seems to be something that “is already there”, and that we can only control to a small extent.⁹¹ Heidegger speaks in general terms, but he could

⁹¹ Ibid, 79.

easily be speaking of a boredom specific to the internet. When I visit a news site for the second time in a day, I know that there may not be any new content available. With every successive visit, this likelihood grows. I know that the likely result of my procrastination is only a temporary success in driving away boredom, and this simple fact of consciousness – my knowledge of the possibility of becoming bored – indicates that boredom has already partly awoken, and that I ultimately lack control over it. Nevertheless, my desire to maintain control is obvious across the net, and particularly in social network sites, where users can enter into predictable but interesting spheres over which they have (at least the illusion of) control. Social media of all stripes are a means of driving away boredom; they are the symptoms of a boredom that is, at least in modernity, always already there. The ubiquity of their use testifies both to the current dominance of the mood and to our real *need* to drive it away.

Although boredom always threatens to move from the edges of the screen into its centre, it cannot be said to be “awake”. Boredom is only partly awake, and we cannot force it further – but we can *let* it be awake, or *guard against* it falling asleep.⁹² Unfortunately, this would mean delivering ourselves over to something to which we do not want to be delivered over. Being bored is unpleasant – much less pleasant than being entertained, and at least a little less pleasant than being simply distracted. Who would want to “guard against” the knowledge that a person can accrue by browsing Wikipedia? I would much rather immerse myself in the attunement of distraction than of some dreary, uncertain boredom.

⁹² Ibid.

The reason that I can only ever temporarily succeed in this war against boredom is that boredom is not localized in a single boring object, but is spread out more broadly: its “location” is uncertain. Boredom is not purely internal to the subject that feels bored, since something boring “comes toward us precisely *from out of things themselves*”. Boredom may therefore be something external or objective. However, it cannot be “exclusively” objective, since a boring blog, for instance, is not always and everywhere boring. Boredom is therefore both “subjective” and “objective”: “[t]he characteristic of ‘boring’ thus belongs to the object and is at the same time related to the subject”. Boringness is somehow located between the person reading the tedious blog entry and the entry itself. No amount of fleeing from a boring object will ever take me away from boringness itself.⁹³

The between-ness of boringness is significant, but less so than “the way in which we here explain this characteristic of boringness by direct paraphrase”. In talking about an entry as boring, I am anything but neutral: I am suggesting that it is “wearisome, tedious, which is not to say indifferent”. This means that I am “present while reading, given over to it, but not taken by it”, or that I am *in an attunement*. The blog’s wearisome, tedious character somehow holds me in limbo, unable or unwillingly to navigate away, and leaves me empty, unable to experience it as something meaningful. “Wearisome means: it does not rivet us; we are given over to it, yet not taken by it, but merely held in limbo by it. Tedious means: it does not engross us, we are left empty”.

⁹³ Ibid, 82-84.

Clearly, this wearisome limbo and tedious emptiness is something – an attunement with at least these two characteristics – “that we would like to see suppressed”.⁹⁴

Given that boredom is something that we try to drive away or suppress, we can expect to find it in sites of diversion, or places where we try to pass the time. In fact, Heidegger claims that we can find the “essence” of boredom in such places: “it is precisely in *passing the time* that we first gain the correct *orientation* in which we can *encounter* boredom *undisguised*”. In this encounter, boredom appears as something that lays over a situation as an attunement. When I read something dull, for instance, I “constantly maintain” myself within an experience that is not isolated to one thing or another, but that necessarily includes me. When I pass the time in such a way, I notice that boredom has the same sort of hybrid, trans-subjective and -objective, character possessed by Dasein. Boredom – not everyday boredom alone, but every kind of boredom that might be an attunement – should therefore be apparent in places where we pass the time.⁹⁵

The character of passing the time, however, may be different in these different kinds of boredom, and Heidegger therefore endeavours to distinguish two initial forms in order to find an attunement in which we genuinely move:

In becoming bored by something we are precisely still held fast by that which is boring, we do not yet let it go, or we are compelled by it, bound to it for whatever reason, even though we have previously freely given ourselves over to it. In being bored with..., on the other hand, a certain detachment from that which is boring has already occurred. That which is boring is indeed at hand, yet we are bored without that which is boring specifically or explicitly boring us; we are bored – almost as though the boredom came from us and as though the boredom

⁹⁴ Ibid, 86-87.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 89-91.

continued to propagate itself, without needing to be caused by or bound to what is boring any more.⁹⁶

The first form of boredom, being bored by..., is characterized by the way that we seem stuck to something in particular. The second form of boredom, being bored with..., is characterized by detachment. The second form helps to clarify the nature of the attunement at issue here: in this second form of boredom, “the boredom is no longer nailed fast to something, but is already beginning to diffuse”; “it radiates out over other things”, and in so doing, it mirrors the spatially and temporally ambiguous nature of Dasein, or “a strange horizon” of Dasein. In this form, “everything becomes boring”.⁹⁷

Staving Off Boredom (with an iPhone)

Passing the time takes place in both forms of boredom, but its character changes between them. In the first form of boredom, passing the time is integrally related to something specific by which we drive away “a particular boredom”.⁹⁸ To illustrate the nature of passing the time and the other characteristics of the first form, Heidegger gives an example of becoming bored by something specific: getting stuck in a train station.

The experience is thoroughly familiar: having misread a schedule, you find yourself stuck

⁹⁶ Ibid, 92. Ellipsis in original.

⁹⁷ Ibid. This phrasing – that boredom “gives our Dasein a strange horizon” – makes some sense now, and will make more sense by the end of this chapter. Dasein should, by its very nature, be something strange when we come upon it. Dasein, precisely in its ownmost familiarity, is not something that we know as we know things. It is “strange” in this sense. Boredom’s strangeness, in showing us Daseinical things, shows us also the strangeness of Dasein.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 92-93. This illustrates the nature of the ontological difference: although the attunement of boredom, as something ontological, is separated from particular boredoms, as ontical things, these ontical phenomena reveal something about the ontological thing itself. Moreover, and maybe more significantly, the ontological thing of boredom is not by any means separate from the historical world, just as Dasein is not separate from it.

in a completely boring situation with nothing to do but wait. Heidegger spends quite a bit of time exploring the significance and details of this example, but many other contemporary examples – waiting in line for a show, working at a call center, entering data into a spreadsheet – would illustrate this sort of situational boredom just as well. I would like to keep Heidegger's reference to a train station but add another element – a smart phone – and ask if his descriptions would be altered by the ability to connect to the net.

Heidegger's first claim is in line with the general argument so far: in becoming bored by the train station, we become desperate to drive time along in order that it will pass more quickly. However, in distracting ourselves with small things like a station map, the view out the window, or something on Facebook's News Feed, we fail to drive time away; we cannot direct our actions at time itself. We long less for an end to boredom than for *control over* our boredom, but because we cannot control the time at which the train will arrive, we fail to pass the time, end our boredom, or control anything.⁹⁹

Although we fail to effectively pass time in the station, our focus on it evinces an orientation toward time, showing us that time is somehow a central issue here. We are indeed more than just focused on time: we are in fact *confronting* time when we try to drive it on. Time is an enemy whose life must be shortened. This confrontation is uneasy and reflective, and it makes a distinct consciousness of the fact of passing the time apparent. This consciousness is nowhere more evident than in the act of watch checking. This act "is not itself a passing the time"; rather, it "already indicates, by its helpless

⁹⁹ Ibid, 93-94.

gesture, our failure to pass the time”. As such, it shows us “that we are *becoming increasingly bored*”.¹⁰⁰ In Heidegger’s example, this increase in boredom is unquestionably apparent to the individual that is experiencing it; the act of checking a watch is only the best indicator of the thorough boredom of the situation. But that consciousness of boredom is, I think, lessened when I check the clock on an iPhone. Looking at the time on my phone has the same effect – “I can’t believe that only five minutes have passed” – but it *also* invites me to go online and see what other distractions I can find. There may be none, but I can at least occupy myself for a few minutes making sure. And when there are distractions, I can be taken out of the situation and removing me from the consciousness of my boredom. This is not to say that my boredom itself is lessened when I return from the net to the station, but that I have managed to hold it in abeyance for a time.

The point may be clearer from a purely digital example. If different phenomena correspond to the growth of the consciousness of boredom in different situations, with watch checking being a prominent phenomenon in a situation where waiting is the key feature, then we can expect to see a similar phenomenon in virtual boredom. What indicates impatience when we go online? Certainly there are situations where I’ve had to wait for something on the net, refreshing a browser or an inbox until it arrives. This is analogous to checking a watch while waiting for Heidegger’s train. At other times, I’ve been stuck in an office job waiting not for some digital item but for the end of the day. Here, although I wanted to drive time along, I at least had the freedom to entertain myself by surfing the net while doing it. Visiting news sites, playing games, or looking at

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 95-97.

Wikipedia provide a qualitatively different experience than sitting at a desk waiting for a message or wandering a station waiting for a train: they take me away from my boredom, turning my mind to something else. I may go back to being bored afterward – I may even have been bored in some way while I was distracted – but for those few minutes or hours, I was entertained. Additionally, I think that these experiences are, for a growing part of the West, more common than the experience of waiting. If I can pull out an iPhone anywhere and go online, then I never have to be bored *by* something *against my will*; I never have to be *conscious* of my boredom. I want to make the preliminary argument, then, that the virtual boredom that is associated with aimlessly browsing the net does not map onto the first form of boredom, being bored by.

*Emptiness and Limbo*¹⁰¹

This may be issuing too quick a judgment, however, especially since boredom involves more than just passing the time: it also holds us in an inactive limbo while leaving us unpleasantly empty. I turn to these characteristics of boredom in turn.

Heidegger derives a distinctly temporal conception of being held in limbo through the example of the watch: when I check my watch I demonstrate that I would like to make time “pass *more quickly*”. This means that it is going *slowly*”. But because we can be bored for any length of time, its objective length does not play a role in boredom.

¹⁰¹ Words like “emptiness”, “limbo”, and “indifference” seem to carry negative connotations with them; implicitly opposed to the positive modern values of activity and fullness, they elicit a bad reaction. However, Heidegger does not intend to associate boredom with such negative, moralizing sentiments. In fact, he suggests that in boredom Dasein actually “experience[s] a particular compulsion” to “the peculiar truth or manifestness that lies in this attunement”. There is something profound in the emptiness and limbo that draw Dasein in (Ibid, 139).

Watch checking demonstrates that time itself cannot be too long, but can move too slowly. When I ineffectively fight against the slowness of time, hoping to overcome its “vacillations”, I demonstrate that I am held in limbo.¹⁰² Becoming bored now seems to be “a peculiar *being affected in a paralysing way by time as it drags and by time in general*, a being affected which oppresses us in its own way”. Although this definition places time in its centre, it actually leaves time “altogether enigmatic”: I recognize its oppressiveness and its power, but I do not know what time itself is.¹⁰³

Time oppresses: this is one of the indirect features of the temporality of being bored by that we can readily identify. How does this happen? Normally, time does not oppress us, and normally, we are occupied. When we are occupied by something – when we are passing the time effectively – we are perfectly unconscious of time; we pay it no attention. Time does not drag. Dragging is what time does when all of our normal occupations are stripped away. Moreover, when we feel oppressed by the dragging of time and try to drive it on, we are concerned not with time in general, but with a particular time. We are held in limbo only by particular times. Becoming bored by is therefore “a *being held in limbo by time as it drags over an interval of time*” that is specific.¹⁰⁴

I said before that virtual boredom does not seem to exhibit the same symptoms of passing the time that the first form of boredom exhibits, but these ideas of dragging and

¹⁰² Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 97-98.

¹⁰³ Heidegger claims that we do not, and cannot, understand time directly, but we can develop some understanding of boredom. His method is therefore indirect: the phenomenological study of boredom is intended to elucidate something of the nature of temporality (Ibid, 98-99). It should be noted that the centrality of temporality is not coincidental to boredom: it is also the key feature of the mood of anxiety examined in *Being and Time*. In both works, Heidegger demonstrates an essential connection of Being, time, and Dasein.

¹⁰⁴ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 100.

limbo offer another possibility. My response to time's dragging is to try to find occupation in something, but I'm not interested in some particular thing; I'm interested "in *being occupied as such* and in this alone".¹⁰⁵ Any diversion is a good diversion, and an iPhone presents me with any number of ways to entertain myself. In this sense, my consciousness of the boredom that permeates the train station is unimportant: the simple fact that I'm attempting to find occupation in walking to the window, checking the map, or visiting Facebook is enough to demonstrate that I'm bored. The important element of my response to time's dragging isn't the content of these distractions but the simple fact of my engagement with them.

The above example illustrates more than just being held in limbo by time's dragging: it also shows that I am afraid to fall into boredom. When we are occupied, we are occupied with things; we are "*taken*" by them, or even "*lost*" or "*captivated*" by them.¹⁰⁶ In being so occupied, we forget about everything else – even about "the very time that we use for it and waste on it". We are *satisfied* when we are occupied by things, and *empty* when we are unoccupied. But even when we are bored by something to such an extent that this thing leaves us empty, we are alongside this thing and in the midst of many other things.

To illustrate: physically, I'm sitting in a train station, oriented to the exits, the departure platform, the vendors, and so on; virtually, I'm connected to my friends by Facebook, my parents by email, and a host of strangers by social media. How is it that

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 101. Svendsen makes a similar point: "Strictly speaking, the pastime has no object because what concerns us is not the activity or object we are occupied with, but rather the occupation itself" (*A Philosophy of Boredom*, 118).

¹⁰⁶ In the language of *Being and Time*: we fall into them.

these things, which are present,¹⁰⁷ leave us empty in the same way that the total absence of things might? “We must... say that they leave us empty precisely because they are [present] at hand”: they’re there, but they’re not open to my agency because of the unique character of this situation that requires me to wait. The boredom of the train station, in other words, is situational. I’m bored by all of these things even though I’m in the midst of them.¹⁰⁸

The situational boredom caused by these things that are at meaninglessly, ineffectively present illustrates exactly what Heidegger means by the *emptiness* of the first form of boredom:

Things leave us in peace, do not disturb us. Yet they do not help us either, they do not take our comportment upon themselves. They *abandon us to ourselves*. It is because they have nothing to offer that they leave us empty. To leave empty means to be something at hand that *offers nothing*. Being left empty means to be offered nothing by what is at hand.¹⁰⁹

In the train station, things offer me nothing. Even the iPhone, normally a font of distractions, disappoints. I’m bored by the train station in large part because the things that make it up don’t meet my expectations.

The increasing tedium of the train station demonstrates two ways in which boredom gains a purchase on Dasein. In the first, I am held in limbo by time as it drags, oppressed by the impossibility of my desire to be occupied. In the second, I am left

¹⁰⁷ Heidegger’s term, again from *Being and Time*, is “present at hand”: these things are there for me to look at or interact with in a mode that we usually take to be objective (but that is actually embedded in the metaphysics of presence).

¹⁰⁸ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 101-2.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 103. Contrast this presence at hand of things in a boring situation to the presence at hand of things in a normal situation. When one speaks of something that is there in German, one uses the verb *geben*, to give: “es gibt Dinge” means “there are things”, but it can also mean “it gives things”. Understood differently: beings give possibilities to us, or Being gives beings that are open to our agency. When we are bored, on the other hand, we are presented with – Being presents us with – things that offer us nothing. They give us nothing.

empty by everything around me, offered nothing by the things amidst which I am normally comfortable. These two ways in which boredom bores are, Heidegger argues, structurally connected to one another. When I find myself held in limbo by the dragging of time, I become conscious of my boredom. It is only then that I come to fear falling into a set of things that threaten to leave me empty. Being held in limbo seems, in this first form of boredom, to take determinative primacy over being left empty, and privileging being held in limbo points to the pivotal role of time: “[t]he station refuses *itself*, because time refuses *it* something”. The quotidian form of becoming bored can now be defined in terms of these two structures: “becoming bored is this *essential being held in limbo in coming to be left empty*. Becoming bored is thus the fact that particular things... are in each case *co-determined* by a *particular time*”. This first form of boredom is inseparable from the particular times of particular things.¹¹⁰

The characteristics associated with the first form of boredom can be summed up in point form. In being bored by...:

1. I am *left empty* by “the absence of any fullness” of things that normally occupy us;
2. I am *held in limbo* “by whatever is dragging in a time we somehow need”;
3. I am “bound and stuck fast” to a particular *situation* rather than to any particular thing;
4. I make a *conspicuous* attempt “to pass the time in seeking to be occupied in a particular way with something arbitrary”;

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 104-5.

5. I am *uneasy* with passing the time, since my agency is restricted to the boring situation itself, and I find myself “driven around within” a boredom that seems more and more pressing;
6. I am forced “in between particular boring things” because I cannot act on any of these things themselves or extricate myself from the situation, and I therefore hope to find occupation in *the search for occupation* itself;
7. Boredom seems to *arise extrinsically* “from out of a particular environment”, and I therefore display “a fidgeting directed outward in accordance with the contingency of boredom”.¹¹¹

2.2: The Second Side of Passing the Time: Being Interested

Strange! What does all this point to: nothing boring – neither this nor that – in the whole situation, and yet this situation is offered as a counter to boredom?

— Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*

In his analysis of the first form of boredom, Heidegger identified being held in limbo and being left empty as the two structures of boredom on which a phenomenological analysis of the mood should focus, and suggested that they connected in such a way that “*holding in limbo itself determines and sustains leaving empty*”. However, he has not yet determined that these two structures always operate in such a fashion, since it is certainly conceivable that different forms of boredom would exhibit different constellations of limbo, emptiness, the passing of time, and so on. Because we

¹¹¹ Ibid, 130-31.

do not yet know enough about the nature of the link between limbo and emptiness, particularly about the different characteristics that they may assume under different circumstances, Heidegger suggests that we interrogate what makes possible the link between these structures. He claims that we know that this “peculiar structural *link* [Fuge]... is determined in advance from the whole and original essence of boredom” – that, in other words, the essence of boredom gives rise in some way to holding in limbo and leaving empty.¹¹² But because we do not understand anything of the essence of boredom from which these structures have sprung, we need to go deeper into the mood. This depth will become apparent from an analysis of a boredom that more thoroughly grips us, and the direction of this deepening will be revealed when the second form of boredom is situated alongside the first. The line that can be traced between the first and second forms, exhibiting as it does a greater profundity, shows that there is a third form of boredom yet to come. On the way to this third form, I establish that the boredom that I call virtual exhibits the characteristics of the second, and that, although it is therefore neither quotidian nor profound, it is increasingly important.

Now, although ontological historicity suggests that it is vital to understand both the particular details of the situation and its context in order to establish its broader epochal significance (and vice versa), I want to recall that my principal focus here is on the boredom that can be found on the net. The jargon that is piling up – towards something, but nevertheless – might seem like a distraction from this focus. But I think that the first subheading of Heidegger’s chapter on the second form of boredom – “Being

¹¹² Ibid, 106-7. In making this claim, he is not saying that there is first an ontological or universal category (boredom) that then gives rise to ontical or particular characteristics (holding in limbo and leaving empty), because the essence of (ontological) boredom is neither separate from those (ontical) characteristics nor from the other determinants of the epoch. The essence of boredom cannot be separated from its components.

bored with something and the transformed manner of passing the time: passing the time as that with which we are bored” – suggests otherwise. The phrasing perfectly captures the principal feature of what I am terming virtual boredom: when I am bored on the net, I am not merely bored by the items of interest with which I pass the time; I am in fact bored *with the act of passing the time itself*.

Reddit illustrates that this is an accurate description of the way that many people have come to experience the net. It users are keenly aware of the way that they behave online, and they revel in sharing the details of that behaviour. In a post from 2010, a user named livinglogic wrote the following: “Ever have a lot of work to do, but get caught up procrastinating on the internet, but then get sick of the internet, and of your work, and not want to do anything? Yeah, that’s me right about now”.¹¹³ The original post was well-liked, and says a lot about how becoming bored by something in particular and casting about for occupation can end up in something much worse than simple boredom – but the highest voted comment, by a user named otherself, says a lot more: “I knew getting bored of work wasn’t anything new, but the day I realized you could get bored of procrastinating on the internet was the day I felt this inexplicable feeling of loss”.¹¹⁴ This

¹¹³ livinglogic, “Every Have a Lot of Work to Do But Get Caught Up Procrastinating on the Internet,” Reddit, accessed May 7, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/r/reddit.com/comments/c0ncw/ever_have_a_lot_of_work_to_do_but_get_caught_up/.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. A user named bhaller puts the experience more humorously: “There are some days where I feel like I’ve reached the end of the internet. I die a little inside every time that feeling creeps up on me”. Patriark describes the process more thoroughly: “Hit f5. Nothing new? Wait a little, look at your books. Too much to do. Hit f5 again. AH! Something interesting! Naaaah, it was just a blog post written in self-righteous hyperbole. Hit f5.. Damn, nothing new. Look at books, damn, I need to eat a little so I can take it in one big stretch. Come back from eating, better check if there’s something new on the Net while I digest the food. Oh, finally something interesting. Read it. Get sucked into a pointless debate and hope for upvotes for your enlightened posts. Damn, 66% up/down vote ratio, as usual. Fibonacci sequence is interesting. Read wikipedia entry on Fibonacci numbers. Look at upvotes. Angry atheist yelling at you because you claim atheism can be conceived as a form of religion. Lose faith in humanity. Hit f5 again. Nah, nothing new, better get to my task.. but I’m starting to get hungry again....”. (Throughout the dissertation, I will refrain

speaks beautifully of the ennui of the internet, and it is a sentiment with which many users agreed: “Wait a second, are you me?”; “WHOA. dude you just read my mind”; “Every, single, day”. Furthermore, it is exactly what Heidegger means when he talks about the profundity of boredom: this boredom is something inexplicable that grips Dasein at its core. And its experience as a *loss* suggests that Heidegger is right when he says that we cannot bear to deal with a boredom that becomes profound – that we will flee from it whenever we can. Reddit’s users are regularly bored, are conscious of the fact, and love to talk about it, but they edge away from engaging with it in the way that Heidegger thinks would get them somewhere philosophically significant. The depth of the boredom to which the internet gives rise is more akin to the melancholy of addiction than to the profundity of thought.

To confirm that the boredom of the net and the second form of boredom are closely related, and to draw Heidegger’s conclusions about this second form into the digital world, I turn now to the passing the time, leaving empty, and holding in limbo of the second form, again making reference to my own examples where possible.

Becoming Bored with a Dinner Party and with the Internet as a Whole

Heidegger’s guiding example for the second form of boredom is a dinner party to which we were invited, which we willingly attended, which we enjoyed... but which was, on reflection, boring:

from permalinking through to comments made within Reddit threads. To find comments in threads, please navigate to the main link for the thread, and then search the page for the name of the commenter.)

There is nothing at all to be found that might have been boring about the evening.... Thus we come home quite satisfied. We cast a glance at the work we interrupted that evening, make a rough assessment of things and look ahead to the next day – and then it comes: I was bored after all this evening, on the occasion of this invitation.¹¹⁵

There was nothing in Heidegger's evening that bored him; there was no individual thing or circumstance that led to boredom. On any other evening, he probably would have come home and gone to bed without giving the evening much more thought. This time, however, the boredom *of the evening as a whole* strikes him somehow. He was bored *with* the evening, and he cannot identify *what* it was that bored him: even "with the best will in the world we can find nothing that could have bored us there. And yet I myself was bored. With what, then?"¹¹⁶

The above description is perfectly applicable to the boredom of the net: there's nothing that I can find that I would call *boring* on the net. What could be boring there? It's full of interesting things. More particularly, what could be boring after several hours spent being engaged by the internet – not just occupied, but truly engaged? This engagement what Heidegger is describing, after all: the dinner party was just as engaging as a host of different online pursuits. Wikipedia, for instance, has held my attention seriously and for long periods of time more than once. Reddit has done the same. Online games have been the worst (or the best), providing me with even better examples of this process: hours, even days, have passed without a sustained break in this mental, but also existential, engagement. But in all of these examples I can imagine myself looking back and saying, "I was bored after all this evening".¹¹⁷ There is a sense in which the time that

¹¹⁵ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 109.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

I spent reading articles and comments on Reddit was less engagement than pastime.

Remorse often sets in: even though I may have felt sincerely engaged while reading, I can look back and think, melancholically, that I was only deceiving myself. The evening was pointless – and *shouldn't* it have had a point?¹¹⁸

The symptoms of Heidegger's dinner party boredom and my boredom with the net indicate a passing of time that has a very different nature than the passing of time native to the first form of boredom. Looking back on the dinner party, Heidegger notes that he repeatedly suppressed a yawn without fully realizing it at the time and he was once tempted to drum his fingers on the table. That said, he cannot identify any conscious signs of passing the time, like watch checking. It may therefore be the case that "there was a boredom after all, and merely no passing the time opposing it". But this ignores the possibility that the character of passing the time have changed at the dinner party. Where it once oppressed, it now does something else. Discerning what passing the time does is difficult; even discerning its *symptoms* is difficult. There are, for instance, many socially acceptable forms of passing the time at a dinner party, like smoking, drinking, or idly chatting, and all of these could be construed as something that we do out of a genuine enjoyment or a serious engagement. When we are presented with these socially acceptable forms of passing the time, it can be hard to see them *as* pastimes.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Benjamin is instructive here. "Boredom is a warm gray fabric lined on the inside with the most lustrous and colorful of silks", he writes, and we wrap ourselves in this fabric when we dream. "But the sleeper looks bored and gray within his sheath. And when he later wakes and wants to tell of what he dreamed, he communicates by and large only this boredom" (Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1999), 105-106). The fabric in which we wrap ourselves is the connection we make to the internet, and the dreaming to which we gladly succumb is aimless browsing. When we "awake", we find ourselves unable to say what, exactly, it is that we "dreamed".

¹¹⁹ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 110-12.

Seeing how passing the time incarnates itself in the second form of boredom is easier if we look to an example from the net. The similarities between being bored with the dinner party and being bored with the net are important: in both, I seem to be bored with nothing in particular, but I can reflect after the fact on their actual boredom. But the differences between the examples are important too. First, I'm not invited to surf the net: I choose to do so.¹²⁰ Second, there's no etiquette that governs my bodily habits when I'm home alone. Third, I can follow whatever train of thought I desire for as long as I like without being afraid that I might bore the other guests. There are a number of symptoms that correspond to these behaviours. For instance, if I have been procrastinating by surfing the net for hours, I sometimes come across something that looks interesting, click on it, and realize that I read it earlier that day. Or take a physical example comparable to Heidegger's suppressed yawning (this is a meme that is often posted on 4chan, and one that has resonated more than once for me):

¹²⁰ This is not entirely accurate: habit and addiction play just as much of a role in going online as choice. I discuss habit at greater length in my discussion of Facebook, and addiction in my discussion of Reddit.



Figure 2: Poor Posture¹²¹

Before seeing the image, I was completely unaware of the fact that I was hunched over in my chair with my legs crossed, my left hand propping up my head only a few inches from the monitor, and my right hand held fast to the mouse. I was unaware of myself. The appearance of this image serves as the same kind of jolt of awareness as the post-dinner party reflection: there, I think, “Oh, I wasn’t actually very engaged this evening”; here, I think, “Oh, I must have really been wrapped up in what I was doing”. In both cases, the awareness of the boredom of the situation only takes place after the fact.

Both Heidegger’s example and mine suggest that passing the time is *functionally ambiguous*: it is both a solution to a person’s boredom and the means by which that boredom is prolonged and deepened. Put differently, “[p]assing the time is not like some device, installed to drive away boredom. Rather, in accordance with its meaning, however much our passing the time fights against boredom, it also firmly captures it at the same time”. This is because passing the time is more than just a pastime: it is “our

¹²¹ Proper attribution for this image, as with so many others from the internet, cannot be provided.

entire comportment and behaviour that is our passing the time".¹²² As a total existential phenomenon, it incorporates both the fight against boredom and the capitulation to it.

Passing the time and boredom are linked – even synonymous to a degree.

I gestured at this kind of synonymity at the beginning of this chapter – at the functional ambiguity of aimless browsing – and I emphasized Heidegger's concern with the ambiguity of pre-Socratic philosophy, so I want to summarize this section by noting the importance of that synonymity in passing the time.

We are bored with both the evening, whether it is spent at a dinner party or at the computer, and with the act of passing the time. The (boring) situation, as the broader existential frame for our (in)action, makes possible the making-synonymous of boredom and that act by which we would try to stave off boredom if we were only aware of its existence. Our lack of awareness of the boring nature of the situation, however, means that we do nothing conscious to pass the time. Nevertheless, we do engage in a pastime – one that is synonymous with the whole situation, and thus with boredom itself. In this making-synonymous, the pastime loses its former ability to drive time on. Because passing the time in the second form of boredom is synonymous with the boring situation, and is thus both more undetectable and more inescapable, it is more profound.¹²³ This is a defence, again, of the claim that the evening, despite appearances, was in fact boring. It also works as a defence of my claim that the obsessive preoccupation with online minutiae that is on the rise in the West is fundamentally boring.

“Strange! What does all this point to: nothing boring – neither this nor that – in the whole situation, and yet this situation is offered as a counter to boredom?” The focus

¹²² Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 112.

¹²³ *Ibid*, 113.

in this question should be on the query: *how* is it that the internet can be both the cause of, and solution to, being bored? How can something as enormous and all-inclusive as the internet possibly bore anyone? Is it that there are different types of boredom – that we can find temporary solutions to the most mundane forms of boredom in various online distractions, but that they ultimately end up entrenching a deeper, farther-reaching form of boredom? To answer, I turn first to the emptiness of the second form of boredom, and then to its limbo. Although these structures initially seem absent in the second form of boredom – I no longer know *what* it is that leaves me empty because there is nothing that bores me, and I am not held in limbo by time’s dragging because I have willingly chosen to set aside the evening¹²⁴ – this is illusory. I show that they are progressively profound because of their increasing inclusiveness and their temporal spread.

The Possibility of Emptiness

The character of the second form of being left empty is evident more from the attitude of the bored individual than from anything else. There is a casualness with which I approach, or fail to approach, the unknown cause of boredom, and an inconspicuousness in how I pass the time: I neither know nor care what it is that bores me, and I suspect, given the absence of any obvious signs, that I’m not actually “passing the time” at all. When I set aside an evening for digital pleasure, there’s nothing of the “fluttering unease of searching for something with which to occupy” myself that, Heidegger says, characterizes the first form: I’m not uncomfortable in front of my computer screen, and I

¹²⁴ Ibid, 114-15.

don't cast about for something interesting to do because browsing the net is keeping me completely occupied. Just the opposite, in fact: I am actively involved in a series of conversations with friends via Facebook, MSN, and IRC, with the community members of the forums that I frequent, and with complete strangers on Chat Roulette and 4chan.¹²⁵

Although my casualness makes it seem like I am far from bored, Heidegger argues that this is not the case. The absence of searching for occupation suggests that I am in the boring situation casually. This casualness, and therefore the second form of boredom as such, demonstrates a greater profundity of boredom because in it I abandon myself to "being there alongside and part of things". In such abandonment there can be no searching because searching requires intention, and the casually (and more profoundly) bored person is not intentional. I am, then, left empty in this second form insofar as searching is prevented and an obstructive casualness is diffused.¹²⁶

While this analysis does establish a preliminary understanding of being left empty, it does not cast any light on *how* it is that Dasein, the situation, and boredom are linked. In the first form of boredom, we might answer that the indeterminate thing with which we are bored must not satisfy us. However, we know that "what is decisive about our comportment" in the second form is that we do not search for anything in the evening because "something is obstructed in us. In this chatting along with whatever is happening we have, not wrongly or to our detriment, but legitimately, left our proper self behind in a certain way". The casualness that can be found in this leaving of ourselves indicates that *it is the formation of an emptiness* that links Dasein, the situation, and boredom. The casualness of the second form of boredom means that we willingly

¹²⁵ Ibid, 113-17.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 116-17.

abandon ourselves to “whatever is there going on”. We are happy to let the evening carry us along, relinquishing the possibilities that would otherwise be open. Additionally, this casualness means that when we set aside time for the evening we are leaving our “proper” selves, which is to say our intentional, agential selves – those ideals of liberal selfhood that we imagine we resemble – behind.¹²⁷

This is unclear. How is it that the choice to spend an evening in entertainment signifies something as profound as an “originary emptiness”? The abandonment of ourselves to the evening could be understood in the simple terms of opportunity cost – going to the party means doing less work or getting less rest – but Heidegger wants us to think about this choice in terms of Dasein. More specifically, he wants us to think about *Dasein’s possibilities* in comparison to those of “our proper self”. The abandonment of the proper self signals the formation of originary emptiness because both emptiness and non-emptiness are possibilities of Dasein but not of the proper self. The proper self is ontically intentional, meaning that it is instrumentally bent from itself toward the limited use of some particular thing. As such, it considers things in terms of what they offer or refuse. Both offering and refusal are species of fullness; emptiness is not included among the possibilities of the proper self. When the situation in the second form of boredom prohibits searching for ontical possibilities, then, the proper self fractures, abandoning part of itself to the whims of the situation while reserving its proper intentionality for later. Things are much different with Dasein. Emptiness *is* included among Dasein’s possibilities because Dasein relates to things in a wholly different way: it is not separate from other things, but is instead constituted through, by, with, or in relation to them. The

¹²⁷ Ibid, 118-20.

situation in the second form of boredom makes this different orientation clear: where the proper self abandons itself to the situation, Dasein becomes synonymous with it, in all of its ontical and ontological complexity. The things of the world can do more than offer or refuse, and the situational stance that Dasein is capable of taking with regard to them reveals this. The inclusion of the ontological possibility of emptiness means that the being left empty of the second form of boredom is more profound than that of the first. The profundity of the emptiness of the second form of boredom is related to our ability to perceive deeper into Dasein – into (the formation of) its possibilities.

This reading seems to be moving far away from Heidegger's dinner party and my digital evening excursion, but I think that we can see an emptiness forming in these concrete examples. In my routine, uncritical surfing of the web, I evince no intention: I'm not looking to read a specific message, or find some specific interesting thing; I'm surfing for the sake of surfing, or passing the time for the sake of passing the time. There is no possibility of the non-empty intentionality characteristic of the proper self in this form of boredom. When I go online, I leave that proper, intentional self behind in whatever I was doing last, or cast him ahead into a task that I don't want to arrive. As a proper self, I can see here the coupling of intention, possibility, and fullness, but only as something that is barred from my access. In this glimpse of emptiness there is the glimmer of an opening onto a more originary form of possibility. At the same time, though, and much more powerfully, I know that I am caught in a casual, inconspicuous cycle that begins and ends in boredom.

The Temporality of Limbo

Having found “a more originary manner of being left empty”, Heidegger tries to do the same with being held in limbo. Emptiness and limbo are both significant because they both give an indication of Dasein’s possibilities, but while the possibility of being held in limbo is important, it is grounded in the uncertain nature of the taking of time. We know, says Heidegger, that we cannot cut a piece of time from the whole as we would cut a piece of cake because we can neither know its whole nor imagine what a piece of it in isolation would be like. We only experience temporality in a unified fashion. But this temporal unity means that taking (a little bit of) time, when it happens, must change the whole of time in some unknown fashion.¹²⁸ How does this happen?

When we set aside time for an evening with friends, we take time in such a way that we bring it to a stand without causing it to vanish. Time does not stop, but it does not flow in the same way either; instead, it stands more or less visibly in place, circumscribing the conversation of the evening. In so doing, it “spreads a *stillness* into Dasein” that reassures us that we do not need to rush anywhere or do anything. In spreading this stillness, however, time makes itself, and its particular nature in terms of holding in limbo, opaque: it “join[s] in with things during the time that we have taken”, and we have a hard time discerning its contours or its nature. It is visible insofar as the situation with which it merges is visible, and poorly defined for just that reason. Knowing that time stands still and that it withdraws into the situation helps demonstrate that the character of being held in limbo changes in the second form of boredom. When time stands still, it makes itself apparent as something that stands without appearing *as*

¹²⁸ Ibid, 120-22.

time. We see time in a different light, as it were: we used to know it as something that flowed and rendered things present or absent, but now we see it as something that can stand still and do nothing. This, Heidegger says, shows that this form of being held in limbo “is a *more originary holding in limbo*, which is to say, *oppressing*”.¹²⁹

Again, this characterization seems unusual: how can that which simply stands still oppress? The answer is in the “indeterminate unfamiliarity” of standing time. Heidegger again calls attention to the strangeness of the situation: when time stands still, it becomes something other than the linear time with which we are acquainted, and makes impossible the dragging that we would normally associate with the temporality of boredom. In the indeterminate unfamiliarity of standing time, time “merely abandons us to this being there and part of things – abandons us but does not release us”. *Standing time does not release us*: even when boredom ends, we know that time can still stand, and maybe still is standing. This oppressiveness contrasts sharply to the temporary oppression of a time that drags, since this oppressiveness threatens perennially.¹³⁰

My experience with the net corroborates this characterization of standing time. First, time doesn't “drag” when I'm surfing the net, and I'm not at all aware of its passing. There are times when I've wasted entire days online without really thinking about it. Second, the unfamiliarity of time – the way that it seems not to pass at all – does indeed abandon me among the things of the (digital) world. There's some sense in which “I” become inescapably part of this world, held there by a time that seems to refuse to

¹²⁹ Ibid, 122.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

move forward.¹³¹ Abandoned in the digital world but not released to do as I choose, I do nothing but visit the same websites over and over again. When I leave this strange space of boredom, I know, on reflection, that the time spent – the time *lost* – was boring, but I also know that I'll return. That is to say, I know that time will stand still for me when I return to the net – that time is in some sense always standing still online. The flood of new content that makes its way onto social news sites doesn't appear from some event in the past or some incipient future happening, but seems to irrupt from the standing still of the present into that selfsame present. Finally, time's ability to shape that which enters into its digital, still-standing sway in such a way that the past and the future go unacknowledged *as* past and future shows that time, and especially the time of virtual boredom, has a degree of existential "power": it delimits possibilities, and does so at the existential, which is to say the apparently ontological, level. It *appears* that there is no recourse to anything outside of the net, and not just because of laziness, but because of the apparent nature of time. Boredom temporally delimits the possibilities of Dasein – holds me in limbo – in a manner that seems absolute.

The way that being held in limbo in the second form of boredom manifests itself temporally is clearer now, but the way that it affects the subject is not. In being left empty, we saw the subject sundered into an intentional self and a situational Dasein, and although we might expect to see a similar change in the constitution of the subject in being held in limbo, it seems that our "real" selves have not changed: "[w]e can

¹³¹ Here, an element of desire or intention is also at play. Subconsciously, I am sometimes glad that time is held in abeyance: when time moves unceasingly forward, I am forced to confront the changing, challenging, uncertain world, but when I can engineer the refusal of time, I can lead a safe existence in a predictable one. Even when the guise of interest falls away and its existential character is revealed, boredom and inaction is sometimes preferable to its alternatives.

determine [them] in such and such a way without question at any time”.¹³² In reflection, this seems true: even after spending a full day playing a game,¹³³ I can say, without question, that I know myself, and that I don’t need the net. But the fact that I routinely return to this behaviour suggests otherwise. Furthermore, the spread of this behaviour – the way that it spills over into my browsing habits in particular – suggests that there is something going on that is different than addiction. At any rate, even if addiction suffices to explain why I go back to the net over and over, it at least indicates that my earlier statement – that I know who I really am – isn’t true, and if this is the case, then holding in limbo may have a “subjective” aspect to it after all.

The subjective aspect of limbo is tied to its temporal aspect. Consider again the idea of “taking time”. “Taking” suggests that we take time *from* someone or something – that we take time *from ourselves*, which is to say, from the uncertain length of time that has been allotted to us for our lives. In so taking time, we allot time *to ourselves* (in an obviously different sense), spending it, getting through it, wasting it. In all of this taking and allotting of time, we do not see time *as* time, but as something to be used. Heidegger puts this nicely: “We remove the time during our spending of it, i.e., we remove precisely this *during* within which the invitation and the evening endure”. Our usage of time “removes” the temporal aspect of time, and it becomes “non-temporal” at the party and online. These activities shelter us from time’s forward march.¹³⁴

¹³² Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 122.

¹³³ “A full day” is a bit ambiguous. Certain games have sucked myself and my friends in for marathon sessions of between eight and twenty hours.

¹³⁴ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 122-23. To put it in the language of *Being and Time*: In being bored with..., we consciously take time from those authentic parts of ourselves that might think about the enduring of time and allot it to those inauthentic parts of ourselves that will not reckon with time as time. Insofar as we change our comportment toward time in this being bored with..., we also

But does this change in ourselves come from boredom in particular, or from any occurrence of the standing of time? We often bring time to a stand in order to do something, and we are certainly not bored every time this occurs. This can be explained by moving the focus of Heidegger's analysis from the *taking* of time to the taking of *time* – i.e., to how the unity and horizon of temporality differ from a situation in which we are bored to a situation in which we are otherwise attuned.

Any time that we let time stand we force ourselves to be present in a situation, given over to it, whatever that situation might be. Being present means that we do not turn to the having been (Heidegger's term for the existential or "ecstatic" past from which we are thrown), which necessarily informs the present; we have to sever that connection if we are to be "entirely present". It also means that we do not consider the future; we have to sever that connection in which we anticipate possibilities.¹³⁵ In this double cut we *dissolve* the ecstases of the having been and the future into that of the present:

This *being cut off* from our *own having-been* and our *own future* does not mean that the latter are factually removed or taken away, but means a peculiar dissolution of the future and having-been into the mere present, a *modification* of having-been and future.¹³⁶

In any standing of time, Dasein finds itself, to some degree, cut off from the having been and the future that are most properly its "own", i.e., that help to constitute it more than

change our comportment toward ourselves, and since time and Dasein are ecstatically united, we do in fact change ourselves.

¹³⁵ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 124.

¹³⁶ Ibid, 124-25. This passage is important for understanding time's standing, as it tells us about the temporality of boredom in greater detail, but it is also significant because it provides another example of the presence of the thinking of ontological historicity in Heidegger's early work. In speaking of a "peculiar dissolution", Heidegger is saying that the way that the world *seems* to us counts for more than how the world *is*; he is claiming that this "is" depends centrally on this "seems" for its "existence". The "seems" is based on historical context: the world of being bored with... seems boring (post-facto) not because every dinner party or all internet browsing is necessarily boring, but because we have become accustomed to thinking of them, when we do think of them, as boring. They seem boring, and they are, despite or because of this, ontologico-historically effectual insofar as they delimit Dasein's (temporal-existential) possibilities.

anything else. Although this cutting off is not absolute – these ecstases still “exist” insofar as they can exist – it can seem as if it is. This *seeming* that the having been and the future no longer exist can itself seem ontological. It is therefore the degree to which the having been and the future dissolve that is important for determining whether a time that stands is one that holds us in limbo to such an extent that we are bored, or one that holds us in limbo but leaves our dependence on the having been and the possibilities of the future in sight. When the having been and the future recede, we find ourselves increasingly held in a partially paralyzing limbo, unable to see a future into which to cast our actions or a past out of which to base them. When these ecstases completely disappear, we find ourselves held in limbo to such an extent that we have entered the second form of boredom.

In the peculiar dissolution of the having been and the future into the present, this present, which can no longer be understood in terms that mark it as different from the other ecstases, “comes precisely to a stand”. The now no longer opens onto the having been or the future; there is no sense of a possible having been that informs the present or a future in which possibilities reveal themselves. This language of the loss of possibility is vital for understanding how Heidegger conceives the temporality of standing time: “[*s*]ealing off the past and *unbinding* the future do not eliminate the ‘now’, but they take away its possibility of a transition from not-yet to no-longer, its flowing.... [I]t becomes stuck in its abiding standing, and... it *stretches itself*” to encompass the entire temporal horizon. As with being left empty, it is the originary nature of the loss of possibility in this second form that marks being held in limbo as comparatively profound. When time stands still it produces an ontological effect for the subject by way of Dasein, delimiting

Dasein's temporal possibilities to those of the mere present. The significance of the loss of possibility is this: time's changing is not subjective but Daseinical. The "stretched 'now' stands into our Dasein". In fact, when Dasein is so thoroughly held in limbo, there is no difference between Dasein and its time: "[t]his standing time – this is *we ourselves*".¹³⁷

When we take time from ourselves and give time to ourselves, we willingly enter into a time in which time stands still. In a standing time that holds us completely in limbo, we are set in place: we cannot see the having been and the future as anything other than modulations of a dominant now. This changes the possibilities that are open for ourselves in such a way that they become limited to the present, to the stretched now. Being so set in place – being unable to see possibilities that are other than those of the current situation – we are bored (with...). This is an odd definition of boredom – a negative definition wherein boredom means not being able to conceive of possibilities outside of the moment, and where not being bored means having truly temporal possibilities open to us. Is it an accurate reading of Heidegger's lecture? If so, is Heidegger simply saying that people in different situations can take advantage of different possibilities – that a person at a dinner party can do different things than a person sitting at a desk, or a person walking in the woods, or a person at a political rally? If this is the case, then all of this complicated analysis seems unnecessary. There must be something in Heidegger's definition of being bored with..., tied as it is to Dasein and its temporal horizon, that makes it important.

¹³⁷ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 125.

One of the elements missing from the isolated example with which Heidegger is working, and one that will help to show how Heidegger's definition of boredom in terms of the limbo of standing time is significant, is that of repetition. The single evening spent at the party or on the net is significant on its own terms insofar as it helps us see into Heidegger's understanding of Dasein's temporality, but it is easy enough to imagine that this single evening will not affect the temporal horizon of Dasein's possibilities: these possibilities may be delimited once, but then Dasein will regain the intentional freedom that is characteristic of the proper self. But if we think instead about a habitual behaviour that is repeated over time, and in particular about the habitual use of the net, then we can see Dasein falling into the second form of boredom over and over again. In this repeated entry into the mundane, boredom, as the delimitation of temporal possibilities, becomes naturalized, and, as naturalized, *begins to seem ontological* – even outside of the standing now.¹³⁸ The temporal horizons erode even in exciting times, and it becomes difficult for me to think of a morning that does not begin with the internet or an evening that does not conclude with it. Heidegger's analysis is significant because it draws attention to this ontological effect.¹³⁹

The ontological power of being held in limbo is redoubled by its structural link to being left empty. Both the standing now and the "I know not what" bore us in the second form, and both share the same characteristics of unfamiliarity and indeterminacy.

¹³⁸ Jonathan Franzen describes this phenomenon in *The Corrections: A Novel* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001): "And if you sat at the dinner table long enough, whether in punishment or in refusal or simply in boredom, you never stopped sitting there. Some part of you sat there all your life. As if sustained and too-direct contact with time's raw passage could scar the nerves permanently, like staring at the sun", 271.

¹³⁹ This significance would be clearer if Heidegger were to speak in terms of the repetition of the action that produces that effect. The central chapters on Facebook, Reddit, and 4chan will draw attention to this element of repetition.

Additionally, the being held in limbo and being left empty of the second form are both generative of the corresponding structures of the first form. The two structures are unified in their operation, and Heidegger claims that the basis of this unity is the peculiar temporality that they have in common – a temporality that is not the quotidian time in which the proper self carries out its intentions, but the temporality of Dasein. Without an essential link between Dasein's being and its time, boredom would not be possible.

This existential-temporal basis explains why boredom can seem so oppressive: it is diffused throughout an entire situation and throughout Dasein, and it therefore cannot be located or grasped. This confusion about the location of boredom is oppressive. Again, surfing the net illustrates how this works. When I glance to the corner of my screen, I'm often shocked by how much time has passed – that is, by how the evening, which is a part of my life, has passed by in a standing now that was full of nothing but pointing and clicking – but I can neither point to the real reason for my behaviour nor change it. I may be surprised at how much time has passed, but I often go right back to the net, willingly repeating my actions. This repetition seems to render me powerless. Knowing that I'm bored – that what I'm reading is boring, that the mediocrity of my lack of occupation is boring, that my boredom is itself boring – but being unable to do anything about it is oppressive, and this oppressiveness is worsened by my confusion about the reason for my inability to change. I could say that I'm bored with the net, but that's not really true: it's full of interesting material, and I'm genuinely entertained by that material when I'm online. I could also say that I feel anxious not because of boredom but because of the work that I've put off by procrastinating, but that doesn't explain the temporal diffusion of my procrastination – that is, the way that the time of

procrastination pushes away the looming future, and the way that I, the situation in which I'm embedded, and my procrastination become partially synonymous. It's not entirely clear why I'm unable to make any changes to my behaviour, and it's this dual consciousness of and uncertainty about my inability that is "oppressive".

Consciousness and uncertainty indicate the final conclusion of the analysis of the second form of boredom: one of the effects of the second form is an odd *interiorization* that finds expression in oppressiveness. In being left empty, the proper self is different from Dasein, and boredom can illuminate Dasein by way of its possibility of emptiness. The description of being held in limbo clarifies and complicates the nature of this separation of the proper self from Dasein. When we are held in limbo, we are drawn into ourselves, but less into that proper self with which we are familiar than into that self of Dasein's witness. In being so separated from its proper self, Dasein might find itself able to better understand the existential nature of its mood. But the witness in which we are held in the second form of boredom is not a witness that also implies a thrownness and a projection; instead, the witness of limbo is one that does not include the having been and the future; it is a "pure" witness in which we, as a Dasein that is spread out over the situation, are purely engaged with other entities in the world. In the temporality of the second form of boredom we are "held *more toward ourselves*, somehow enticed back into the specific gravity of Dasein",¹⁴⁰ and we can therefore see two modulations of Dasein: as the proper self is left somewhere in its intentions, Dasein becomes an opening onto the horizontally limitless present on the one hand and the ecstatic unity of temporality on the other. As the attunement of boredom deepens, the former modulation

¹⁴⁰ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 128.

takes an increasingly stronger hold of Dasein. At the same time that boredom reveals Dasein (as a temporal unity) it covers it over (as an extended now).

Just as with the first form of boredom, the characteristics associated with the second can be summed up in point form. In being bored with...:

1. The *emptiness* of boredom first forms itself, and indicates this forming in the “I know not what”;
2. Boredom does not release me, but rather *holds me in limbo* through a time that stands in place;
3. I am not bound to whatever happens in the *situation*, but instead seem free to move about;
4. Passing the time is *inconspicuous*, “hidden from the self that is bored”, as the time of the situation stretches itself out;
5. Passing the time is not uneasy but rather *casual*, as I let myself be bored with the situation;
6. Boredom dissipates “*throughout* the whole situation” rather than remaining restricted to the things that either offer or refuse;
7. Boredom arises “*within and from out of* Dasein on the occasion of a specific situation”, and Dasein therefore experiences “a being drawn into the specific gravity of boredom”.¹⁴¹

2.3: The Profound Boredom of Contemporary Dasein

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 130-31.

The reason for the reduction of the argument to seven points has nothing to do with a desire to structurally compare the one form of boredom to the other. Rather, Heidegger's intention is to foster "learning and understanding how to move in the depths of Dasein".¹⁴² The comparison demonstrates that the first form is less profound than the second in that it grips us with less force, and it points the way to a third form of boredom that would more completely take hold of Dasein. The analysis of profound boredom is thorough and complicated, and it makes almost no reference to specific examples. I will briefly describe the features of profound boredom and demonstrate that they generally do not map onto my experience of virtual boredom before explaining why Heidegger is correct, albeit with caveats, to insist that his analysis describes "contemporary Dasein".

In the first form of boredom, I am bored by something; in the second form, I am bored with (a situation as a whole); in the third form, "*it is boring for one*". The indefiniteness of the language calls attention to the indeterminate unfamiliarity of the former pronoun that bores and the latter pronoun that is bored. When *it is boring for one*, "[n]ame, standing, vocation, role, age and fate as mine and yours disappear"; "here we become an undifferentiated no one".¹⁴³ Although this describes an attunement that is radically unfamiliar, and while Heidegger provides only the briefest possible example of this form of boredom,¹⁴⁴ we can see glimmerings of this "it is boring for one" on the net in both the effect and the affect of anonymity. When I manage to present myself

¹⁴² Ibid, 131.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 133-34. Gilles Deleuze's description of the dividual in "Postscript on the Societies of Control" from *October* 59 (Winter 1992): 3-7 and of the indefinite life in *Pure Immanence: Essays on A Life*, trans. Anne Boyman (New York and Cambridge, MA: Zone Books, 2001) have much in common with this characterization of the one who is bored.

¹⁴⁴ Heidegger suggests that "'it is boring for one' to walk through the streets of a large city on a Sunday afternoon" (*The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 135), but he does not expand. The peripatetic example is appropriate because in it the individual is lost. On a Sunday afternoon, a person could be out and about for any purpose, but it would be difficult to guess what that particular purpose is.

anonymously on a website, I cannot be differentiated from anyone else on that site. Effectively, or from the perspective of the reader, the I that is bored disappears. Affectively too, or from my perspective, the I sometimes disappears: as I grow increasingly integrated, I come to identify less with myself than with the collective, saying things like “We are Anonymous” or “I’m from the internet”. Even in the pseudonymity that characterizes most of the net, the I experiences at least a partial de-individualization. “It is boring for one to play World of Warcraft”, for instance, seems to be a perfectly plausible statement, and “It is boring for one to use Chat Roulette” is the same.¹⁴⁵

Unfortunately, my digital examples don’t really work for Heidegger. As before, he wants to define the current form of boredom in the terms of passing the time, being left empty, and being held in limbo, and my examples don’t exemplify the same characteristics that he describes. In profound boredom, passing the time seems to be absent because there is no thing and no situation to which Dasein can turn for distraction: Dasein is powerless to do anything about its profoundly boring predicament because the things and situations of the world presuppose a Dasein that is individualized and that can pass *its individual* time.¹⁴⁶ This powerlessness seems to be missing from my examples.

When I play World of Warcraft, for instance, I’m perfectly capable of stepping back from

¹⁴⁵ According to pop culture wisdom, Chat Roulette is populated almost entirely by men masturbating. This might sound engaging, but it is the exact opposite: one naked body comes to look much like another. Pornography is similar (with Chat Roulette being only a recent extension of its logic into the realm of social media). Jean Baudrillard’s argument about the move from seduction to fascination and obscenity – the way that what once was a compelling body to which our attention was drawn has become a non-compelling image which only fascinates because of the harsh light that illuminates it – is applicable here (see *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard and Caroline Schutze, ed. Sylvere Lotringer [New York: Autonomedia, 1988]).

¹⁴⁶ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 135. Heidegger also notes that awareness is a key element of the powerlessness of profound boredom – that a profoundly bored Dasein knows that it has been transformed into something non-individual and that it would be both “hopeless” and “presumptuous” “to want to struggle against this attunement”.

my character and extricating myself from Azeroth. I haven't dissolved into my avatar; I'm still me. That said, my experience is not everyone's experience, and there are many horror stories about people that have lost everything because of a Warcraft addiction. Those gamers might be a better guide to the degree of boredom that can be achieved on the net, perhaps illustrating that things like Warcraft tend toward boredom, pointing along a profound trajectory.

The emptiness of the third form of boredom illustrates the same awkward congruence with digital examples as its passing the time. When we are profoundly bored, we do not want anything in particular from the things of the world because we, as a de-individualized Dasein, have been cut off from the worldly concerns of selfhood. In this separation, everything is reduced to the same (absence of) value, and we cannot search for anything better. This devaluation is by no means an evaluation, or a series of selections made by Dasein, because everything becomes indifferent simultaneously: there is no temporal window in which Dasein could conduct an evaluation, and Dasein finds itself included in this instantaneous indifference. Beings refuse themselves as a whole, refusing Dasein any possibilities for action and immersing it in this refusal.¹⁴⁷ Digital diversions move some small distance toward demonstrating this devaluation of beings. With media aggregators, for instance, things are reduced to diversions differentiated only by the degree to which they pique our interest: the content of a headline matters less than the fact that it is a headline. But this seems to better characterize the second form of boredom, where Dasein is still partially distinct from its objects of interest, and where things either have value (as interesting, they get upvoted) or have none (as boring, they

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 137-39.

get downvoted). On other sites, however – and again I suggest 4chan – users approach something like a total, profound indifference to things. This sort of indifference is restricted to particular regions of evaluation, with things like moral distinctions becoming completely obliterated, and finds an ultimate basis in some other form of evaluation, like the lulz, but it nevertheless points toward a growing indifference that could be correlated with the growth of anonymity.

The limbo characteristic of the third form of boredom is more complicated than passing the time or emptiness, and it fails to yield any easy comparisons to the net. As such, I will focus here on the ontotheological character of limbo, beginning with its connection to emptiness.

When beings leave Dasein empty, they tellingly refuse themselves as a whole – i.e., they say something, indirectly, about what they refuse. Additionally, when these beings refuse themselves, they refuse, and therefore tell about, everything – not just about the specific possibilities associated with themselves, but about all possibilities. This telling refusal is an indication of the entire range of Dasein’s possibilities, which is to say the range from which all doing originates. As such a complete indicator, the refusal of limbo is trans-temporal: it is not only a refusal of Dasein’s current possibilities, but of all its possibilities in “respect, retrospect, and prospect”.¹⁴⁸

The temporal character of limbo helps to distinguish Dasein’s abandonment from that of other beings. In limbo, “the self of Dasein... does not... lose its determinacy, but rather the reverse”: if Dasein were a subject that lost all of its possibilities and became just like the objects around it, then we could say that it became indeterminate. However,

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 140-41.

since the loss of possibilities is linked to a temporality that is in turn necessarily linked to Dasein, the event of refusal in fact illustrates a becoming-determinate. The impoverishment of Dasein with respect to its possibilities makes it clear to Dasein that Dasein *is Dasein* and not just a subject – that it “*is there*” in among beings in time. Because the refusal of beings as a whole involves temporality, it is an existential refusal, and as such, it is directed at Dasein.¹⁴⁹

Putting this in a different way might help to indicate the scope of Heidegger’s argument. Consider the idea of possibility as such: “[w]hat concerns a possibility... is whatever *makes it possible*” – what *its conditions* are. When the refusal of beings affects Dasein’s possibilities, leaving Dasein empty while holding it in limbo, it affects not only Dasein and Dasein’s possibilities, but *the condition of possibility of Dasein’s possibilities*. Emptiness and limbo thus point to that which grounds Dasein. This condition of possibilities seems to lack content: as beings refuse themselves more and more, they indicate less and less in way of detail. There is content to a specific entity’s refusal of itself (it refuses Dasein the possibility of doing something that depends on it), and there is a sort of content to the refusal of beings as a whole (the content is this whole), but there is no apparent content in the condition of possibilities as such.¹⁵⁰

Now, although we cannot perceive any content in this lack of content, we can make out two of its formal contours. First, in the limbo of profound boredom, Dasein finds itself impelled toward “*the singular extremity [Spitze] of whatever originally makes possible*”. Something about the lack of content corresponds with the condition of possibility of Dasein’s possibilities, and, as such, corresponds to the origin of possibility.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 142-43.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 143-44.

This condition of possibility can be conceived as a *foundation* for the possible. Second, in the emptiness of profound boredom, Dasein finds itself amidst “the full expanse of beings in their telling refusal of themselves as a whole”. The lack of content reveals beings as they are in the clarity of their refusal, when enacted possibilities have not yet obscured their relationship to one another. This clarity lets Dasein see the *ground* on which possibilities can proliferate.¹⁵¹

Heidegger’s language prefigures his later ontotheological characterization of metaphysics. When he says that “this complete *expanse* of beings in their telling refusal as a whole, and the singular *extremity* of whatever makes Dasein as such possible... become manifest as what is at work in Dasein whenever it must tell itself: It is boring for one”,¹⁵² it is difficult not to hear the rumblings of his later characterization of metaphysics as a dual but unified system that simultaneously grounds the subject in an ontological field while founding it on a theological premise regarding conditions. If this characterization is accurate, then Heidegger is saying that profound boredom illustrates for us the ontotheological character of *our* conception of Being – not of Being as such, but of the way that Being operates for, or seems to, us. The profundity of boredom reaches down far enough that it can illuminate our epochal conception of Being, but not so far that it might make a claim to having touched on Being “itself”. The significance of this claim – that profound boredom can shed light on our ontotheological pre-understanding of the world – should be familiar from the prior discussion of ontotheology in general: we are seeing here the contours of the dominant understanding of the world, and, in seeing these contours, we are able to discern something of their contingency.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 144.

¹⁵² Ibid.

These contours are constructed, not absolute. As such, there must be alternatives to this dominant understanding.¹⁵³

In sum, then, and in the terms of ontotheology: Profound boredom reveals itself and its ontotheological conditions of possibility, and in doing this it also indicates, even if only indirectly, the extra-ontotheological possibility of a wholly other set of possibilities. Or in the terms of Dasein: Profound boredom opens the space for reflection on the self as Dasein, then on the possibilities of Dasein, and then on the conditions of possibility of these possibilities; that is, profound boredom opens a space for reflection on (the seeming of) Being.¹⁵⁴

On its own terms, the third form of boredom can be understood as that which reveals Dasein's condition of possibilities; when compared to the other forms, it can be understood as the most profound. This comparative understanding is legitimate since the third form exercises a stronger grip on Dasein than the first two, but it also betrays a previously unnoticed "prejudice", claims Heidegger: we assume that boredom develops in stages. In this prejudice, we assume that the tedium of the train station gives rise to the use of an iPhone and that this in turn leads to a revelation concerning Dasein. Such a

¹⁵³ There is a brief paragraph a few pages later in the text – only two sentences – on Kierkegaard and the moment of vision that supports this reading, and its significance might be missed in a reading that was not so focused on ontological historicity. Heidegger claims that Kierkegaard was the first one to comprehend a moment of vision in contemporary philosophy, and that his comprehension opened up "the possibility of a completely new epoch of philosophy... for the first time since antiquity". This fits into Thomson's account of ontological historicity: Heidegger views post-Socratic philosophy as metaphysics, seeing the rise of occasional epochal differences in the content but not the structure of those metaphysics. However, he suggests here that "the *possibility* of a completely new epoch of philosophy has begun" – that Kierkegaard opened the space in which alternatives might find articulation (Ibid, 150).

¹⁵⁴ This reading of profound boredom makes almost no reference to its temporality, and this is deliberate. Although Heidegger devotes some space to this topic before turning to a definition of boredom, I cannot follow his analysis without making a substantial detour into the second division of *Being and Time*, attempting to explain how the work on boredom helps to support Heidegger's broader existential analytic. (Heidegger himself notes that "you cannot understand these paragraphs in isolation, without appropriating the whole work [i.e. *Being and Time*] in its inner construction" [Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 151].) This is of course not an unimportant project, but it is not directly relevant to this dissertation.

process of development is conceivable but unlikely, and it obscures the nature of the relationship between the forms and the way that the third form grounds the others. The forms of boredom are not related to each other in a linear fashion, but in one that highlights the socio-historical context, or the historical ontology, in which each form of boredom is made visible or invisible. This is illustrated by the way that the three forms transition, or fail to transition, into one another:

The first form of boredom *obstructs* the transformation into the second or third form. It displays a “characteristic unease” that “belongs to its essence”, and this unease necessarily leads to the desire to escape. This is precisely the opposite of what happens in profound boredom, where escape is neither possible nor desirable. That said, this does not mean that the first and third forms are not connected, since the desire to escape is ultimately born of a fear of the taking-hold of the third. “To put it another way: in the first form of boredom there is still a faint reflection, although not recognized as such, of the possibility of profound boredom that is not understood”.

The third form of boredom *grounds* the first and second forms: it is “the condition of the possibility of the first and thereby also of the second”. In fact, “*every* form of boredom comes to arise *out of this depth* of Dasein”. Heidegger makes this claim on the basis of the existential analysis of the connection between the being and the time of Dasein that is so well revealed in profound boredom: “although we *initially do not know* this depth and *even less pay attention* to it”, it nevertheless makes the other forms of boredom, and the transitions between them, possible.

The second form of boredom *illustrates the transitions* between the first and third forms. It can precede the first form, beginning as a pleasant evening that then becomes

explicitly tedious, or it can precede the third form, becoming an occasion for profound reflection. However, this correlating procession “does not at all mean that the second form of boredom causes the others”; rather, it illustrates that “a corresponding transposition of man’s existence always occurs in advance here”: these transitions from out of the second form of boredom reflect a prior existential change in Dasein. They are symptoms of Dasein’s greater or lesser profundity, or of its approach to or withdrawal from Being.¹⁵⁵

The second form of boredom is important for Heidegger principally because it neither obstructs nor facilitates reflection. Heidegger worries that the most common understanding of boredom today is a moral one wherein inaction is condemned, and that this understanding encourages people to keep busy rather than to let themselves sink into the attunement of boredom. Whenever the first form of boredom strikes, we immediately seek to answer it with activity: boredom is suppressed by the drive to production, accumulation, individuality, and so it has a difficult time transitioning to another form. The thinker likewise has a harder time getting through to its essence.¹⁵⁶ Although it is important for him, this second form is vital for me because it seems to perfectly describe the way that we, today, are bored. I share Heidegger’s concern regarding the consequences of the effects of the suppression of attunement, but I am less sure about their origin or the exact nature of those effects. Where Heidegger points to an implicit moral injunction to avoid the first form of boredom, I want to point to a different sort of implicit injunction, born of the net but not restricted to it, to enter into and maintain ourselves in the second form of boredom.

¹⁵⁵ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 156-57.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 158-59.

The caveat that I want to establish is this: while it is more and more common for us to enter into the second form of boredom, it does not appear as a form of boredom while we are within it, but as a form of interest or fascination. This is not far off Heidegger's analysis: the boredom of the dinner party generally goes unrecognized as such; it is only rarely that a moment of recognition steals upon us. The same is true for the net: the examples that I have provided only infrequently demonstrate moments of consciousness regarding virtual boredom. The difference is that I find myself spending more time on the net and less time stuck in the train station. I go to fewer dinner parties. When I do go to dinner parties, it's a volitional, conscious act that requires not only that I set aside some time for myself, but that I take time from the self that would otherwise be going online. My default mode of behaviour, established by non-volitional habit, is a virtual one. This certainly means that it's easier for me to avoid the first form of boredom: there are very few instances where I'm stuck wanting for entertainment, where the things around me refuse to offer me anything. The internet rarely refuses. It also means that I end up avoiding the third form, both because of the reasons that Heidegger discusses and because my unconscious habit (and those habits of more and more people around me) is to go online, to get engaged, and to do anything but stay still.¹⁵⁷ In entering and maintaining myself in the second form of boredom, I'm not bored in a way that would encourage a transition to another form (which would be decidedly

¹⁵⁷ I would suggest that these habits are shared by everyone who has regular access to a computer. In the summer of 2011 I spent two months studying German in Marburg where I met people from dozens of different countries around the world. One of the very first subjects of conversation with these students was always the internet – particularly the difficulty they had finding a reliable, fast connection. Whether they came from Kazakhstan, Syria, Peru, the Ukraine, Vietnam, or Greece, they were all appalled by the general absence of services other than the slow and expensive “surf sticks”. I mention this purely anecdotal evidence both because I was struck by the sensation of need that arose in the temporary absence of an internet connection and because I think that this indicates a global tendency, at least among a particular class: internet use is an unconscious habit with tremendous affective force and spatial reach.

uncomfortable); rather, I'm bored in a way that suggests that I'm not bored at all. The second form of boredom expands and expands, universalizing itself as the interesting.

This actually squares with Heidegger's prescient analysis of contemporary Dasein. In one of the most famous passages from early in the lectures, before the three forms have been analyzed, Heidegger asks the following: "Have things ultimately gone so far with us that a *profound* boredom draws back and forth like a silent fog in the abysses of Dasein?"¹⁵⁸ In asking this question, he suggests that boredom as such characterizes the age. This seems, at first, to be incorrect: if we are all bored then we should expect to be suffering from some sort of boring oppression, either 1) by the weight of the clearly boring situation that offers us nothing, 2) with the uncertainty about the boring character of the situation and our mysterious inability to change things, or 3) "by" the possibility-precluding expansion of the refusal of beings as a whole. In each case, we would have cause for some kind of concern: there would be something obviously abnormal about these situations – something boring. Here, however, in the universalization of interest, there is no oppressiveness whatsoever. Heidegger's vital claim is therefore this: *it is the very absence of oppressiveness that oppresses*. The casual ease with which we maintain ourselves in digital interest belies a boredom, and a concomitant profundity, that has been forced away. The absence of oppressiveness itself oppresses, and this is what characterizes the telling emptiness of contemporary Dasein. We know that this characterization of contemporary Dasein as an entity that is oppressed by the absence of oppressiveness is accurate because of the signs pointing to it: our

¹⁵⁸ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 80.

restless drive to activity – our incessant interest – indicates that we are running from something that would, terrifyingly, oppress.¹⁵⁹

2.4: Conclusion: A Virtual Boredom

In this chapter, I turned to Heidegger's analysis of the three forms of boredom, focusing particularly on passing the time, being left empty, and being held in limbo. I showed that the first form of boredom generally does not map onto the boredom of the net because the first form describes specific things in a specific unpleasant situation. The limbo and emptiness of this first form are apparent in my failure to drive time along and the refusal of those things that are present to yield to my wishes. I then showed that the second form is very different, since it is difficult to discern passing the time, emptiness, or limbo on the net. Still, this does not mean that they are not present or not powerful. After highlighting the functional ambiguity of the passing the time associated with this second form wherein the net is both the cause of and solution to the problem of boredom, I showed that the emptiness of the second form reveals the possibilities and impossibilities of Dasein, thereby revealing Dasein as such. I also showed that the second form's limbo oppresses Dasein by expanding the temporal horizon of the present, pushing away an ecstatic and unified understanding of time while at the same time hinting at its background presence. I noted that all of these effects are magnified by repetition and habit, which means that the net makes the spread of the second form of boredom seem exceptionally well entrenched. Turning to the third form, I argued that its

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 163-64.

presence on the net is tentative at best. This helped me make the final argument that Heidegger's analysis of contemporary Dasein is largely legitimate: we avoid the first form of boredom, we never experience the third form, and the second form appears, ever present, in the guise of fascination. The apparent absence of boredom reinforces the argument that boredom illustrates a modern metaphysics that continues to cover itself up.

But why a "virtual" boredom? If I find myself in such strong agreement with Heidegger's analysis, suggesting changes only to a few of its details, then why not say that the boredom of interest, of fascination, of the internet, of the information age, and so on, is profound?

I use the term for three reasons. First, by saying that our boredom is virtual rather than digital, electronic, or wireless, I leave its scope relatively open, suggesting that the boredom under consideration is not restricted to the net. This is important: if virtual boredom were restricted only to digital technologies, and particularly to those of social media, then my argument concerning the epochal significance of the mood would be harder to advance. I turn to this question of the scope of virtual boredom in the next chapter, where I consider it in the very broad terms of the essence of technology. The digital medium of virtual boredom and its online location may shape the character of boredom, but they do not stop it from spreading to other media. Just the opposite, in fact: the more that we use "boring" media, the more the rest of the world seems already, and absolutely, mediated. Baudrillard is precisely correct on this count.

Second, describing our boredom as virtual leaves the exact definition of the term uncertain, calling its character, and even its fact, into question. I want to avoid turning my reading of boredom into a stable ground for a social scientific investigation of the

prerequisites for and characteristics and effects of boredom; I want this investigation of virtual boredom to call such grounds into question. I intend for the question implied in the adjective to “provide a hold”¹⁶⁰ – not an ontological ground, but a purchase that understands that it functions ontologically while at the same time providing the means by which to undermine itself – for deeper questioning. This is an ideal for my analysis of virtual boredom rather than an actuality, since the boredom of the net tends toward pretending that the ground is not there rather than calling it into question (as profound boredom might do); it therefore serves as a reminder of the possibility of profound boredom and the limitations of boredom’s contemporary character.

Third, for people of a certain age, the word “virtual” will always be associated first and foremost with the dream of virtual reality. Growing up, I felt sure that my future would take place in William Gibson’s matrix, Neal Stephenson’s Metaverse, or *Star Trek*’s holodeck, and I’ve had a hard time driving those dreams from my head. “Virtual reality” will always mean escape. And this, I think, is the best reason to use the term: a *virtual* boredom is one that fascinates, pulling you into a different world, and gradually convincing you of its reality – not necessarily of its superiority, but of its singularity. The virtual world seems to be the only one that exists.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 161.

Chapter Three: Technology/Ontology

In the first chapter I reviewed the literature on boredom in order to determine, in part, that boredom was a thoroughly historical phenomenon: arising in the English language only in the 1760s, boredom seems to be indexed to modernity. For Goodstein, this means that boredom is related to subjectivity but also, more importantly, to the rhetoric of reflection on subjectivity. Boredom is associated with that generally unconscious and increasingly important phenomenon of continuous self reflection. By extending this formal concept of the rhetoric of reflection, I argued that this modern tendency to reflect on oneself can also be understood in the ontological terms of mood or attunement. In the second chapter I embraced this broad scope while also narrowing in on the particular boredom associated with the contemporary period. By considering Heidegger's three forms of boredom, I explored how the generally unconscious boredom that one experiences *with* the internet can illuminate certain temporal features of human existence: the boredom of the internet is distinct in that it tends to make us forget about the past and the future, and engenders in us, after much repetition, the twin sensations of interest and powerlessness. Still, in so doing, virtual boredom illustrates a number of existential features that were not previously apparent, including that of Dasein's originary possibilization. In other words, in the second chapter I showed that virtual boredom is not "simply" ennui or routine or interest, but something with much broader implications.

In this chapter I pursue these implications by interrogating the relationship between virtual boredom and technology. I argue that the connection between these two modern phenomena is an essential one: they are not incidental epiphenomena that happen

to arise at the same time, but are rather vital components of the mood that governs the internet. Put another way, the attunement of virtual boredom is itself “technological” in character, insofar as “technology” signifies not a particular set of electronic devices – these are important (ontical) elements of virtual boredom, but they are not what I will call essential (or ontological) – but a dominant way of experiencing or viewing the world, or a dominant way that the world “is”. Boredom helps explain the contemporary character of the essence of technology as something that is by no means technological; virtual boredom contributes to and modulates that essence, and examining that essence demonstrates the epochal significance of boredom. In other words, I propose to analyze how boredom becomes entrenched as a worldview, and made ontological as a world.

That is my general purpose. More specifically, I argue that the concordance of technology and boredom is at its most precise with regard to the attitude of disposability engendered by technology. Technology and boredom both operate by bringing the things of the world within the sphere of disposability, or by posing them as simultaneously inconsequential and required. The response to this collecting and displaying of the world is a constant search for the interesting that finds expression throughout the internet. This facet of virtual boredom would remain unclear without the explicitly technological lens that I apply and examine here.

Finally, throughout this chapter I provide a phenomenologically grounded explanation of historical ontology. Although we might speak of the essence of technology in terms of the transhistorical, since it seems as though we have always been more or less “technological”, we can also speak of it as simply historical, since it is so closely tied to the key (ontical) elements that give shape to our particular boredom today.

This complex relationship exhibits the character of historical ontology. This chapter therefore advances not only an explanation of the way that boredom and technology are linked to one another (this is its primary goal, but not its only one), but also sheds further light on the concept of historical ontology by illustrating how a concrete phenomenon is simultaneously “historical” and “ontological”.

In what follows, I proceed through Heidegger’s central essay on technology, arriving at a conclusion illustrating boredom as a historico-ontological phenomenon that is tied less to individual technologies than to a modern subjectivity that is disposed to disposal. The analyses that follow in the second half of the dissertation – analyses of the subjectivism of Facebook, the communal identity of Reddit, and the anonymous mass of 4chan – follow immediately from this conceptual framework.

3.1: Questioning Technology

Heidegger famously claims that “the essence of technology is nothing technological”. In this section I lay the ground for this argument in order to show how the essence of modern technology, as that which simultaneously reveals and conceals Being, operates analogously to and complements boredom, both revealing and concealing the technological/ontological frame that governs human action. By re-interpreting Heidegger’s essay through a close reading of key parts of the original German coupled with a consideration of the contemporary expression of the essence of modern technology, I provide an explanation of the largest issues here at stake, especially the disposable quality of modern technology in general and social media in particular – a

quality that both engenders boredom and expands the scope of the essence of modern technology.

Ancient and Modern Technology

Early in “The Question concerning Technology”, Heidegger distinguishes between the “true” and the “correct”. The instrumental conception of technology states that technical objects are the means to an end, and it is clearly correct: in everything that I do, I use some things to accomplish other things. This is the common sense conception of technology with which everyone today is familiar. It is, however, not necessarily true. To get at the truth of technology, whatever this might be, Heidegger suggests that we first think about the conditions that allow the correct to seem correct, about what might lie outside of the limits of the correct, and about the potential alternatives to correctness.

With this method in mind, Heidegger suggests that the limits of the modern, correct conception of technology can be illustrated through a comparison to the Greek conception of technology. He turns to the Greeks because the modern idea of instrumentality rests entirely on a mechanical conception of causation and because the Greeks understood causation quite differently. In principle, modern causation can be reduced entirely to physics. When I strike a billiard ball, the ball moves in response. I am the efficient cause of the ball’s movement. My initial decision to hit the ball with the stick can also be reduced to physics, since my brain is, again in principle, reducible to a series of synaptic firings. This mechanical understanding of causation was less important for the Greeks than it is for us, since it was only one of four causes that included form,

matter, and telos. The Greeks thought of the efficient cause as that which gathers together materials into a form according to some end rather than that which forces them there. The Greek understanding of causality thus emphasized the interdependence of the causes – but it also emphasized a sort of responsibility: the causes were responsible *for* something; they were specifically responsible for bringing an object forth into presence, or helping it to arrive. The manufacturing of objects (*technē*) was thus also an art (*poiēsis*). It was furthermore a way of knowing (*epistēmē*), which is to say a way of revealing (*alētheuein*) the truth of the world – one that included an interdependent relationship between the producer and the thing produced, a conception of responsibility that opened onto the mutual production of the world, and a soft distinction between art and manufacture. Heidegger thus conceives Greek technology principally in terms of the sort of world that it revealed, and only secondarily in terms of what it was used for.¹⁶¹

Modern technology, like ancient technology, reveals the truth of the world, but the truth that it reveals is necessarily different: it reveals the world as something that is ready for use. The truth of modern technology is clear from the efficient cause alone: the things of the world are means to ends. The human that uses them in an instrumental fashion demands that they work properly, which means to work as efficiently as possible. Although a tract of land might harbor any number of possible uses, for instance, the human that needs to produce energy sees it in the simple terms of efficiency – and this changes how that land is seen: “[a] tract of land is challenged into the putting out of coal and ore. The earth now reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit.” This deployment of modern technology takes the form of a challenging of the

¹⁶¹ Martin Heidegger, “The Question concerning Technology,” in *The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 3-13.

earth, revealing the world as something that is set upon to produce energy for any number of possible ends (one of which must be the further production of energy). Modern technology issues demands of nature from the outset.¹⁶²

“To challenge” translates the German verb *herausfordern*. The term connotes something beyond the English word “challenge”, thanks to the separable prefix *heraus-*. William Lovitt, the translator of “Die Frage nach der Technik”, explains:

Herausfordern means to challenge, to call forth or summon to action, to demand positively, to provoke. It is composed of the verb *fordern* (to demand, to summon, to challenge) and the adverbial prefixes *her-* (hither) and *aus-* (out). The verb might be rendered very literally as “to demand out hither”.¹⁶³

In demanding something “out hither”, the person making the demand asks that the thing demanded be set in front of her, made visible and available for interaction. It therefore bears a conceptual connection to the verb *stellen* (to place or to set) – a verb that Heidegger begins to use heavily in the middle of the essay¹⁶⁴ – even if it bears no obvious etymological connection. Because the interpretation of several of the forms of *stellen* is important to the argument that I want to make about disposability and boredom, and because I am about to call Lovitt’s interpretation into question, I want to quote one of Lovitt’s explanatory footnotes concerning the verb before moving on:

The verb *stellen* (to place or set) has a wide variety of uses. It can mean to put in place, to order, to arrange, to furnish or supply, and, in a military context, to challenge or engage. Here Heidegger sees the connotations of *herausfordern* (to challenge, to call forth, to demand out hither) as fundamentally determinative of the meaning of *stellen*, and this remains true throughout his ensuing discussion. The translation of *stellen* with “to set upon” is intended to carry this meaning.

¹⁶² Ibid, 14.

¹⁶³ Ibid, 14n.

¹⁶⁴ Lovitt notes that Heidegger deploys the German verb *stellen* in various forms throughout this section of the essay: “*Stellen* embraces the meanings of a whole family of verbs: *bestellen* (to order, command; to set in order), *vorstellen* (to represent), *sicherstellen* (to secure), *nachstellen* (to entrap), *verstellen* (to block or disguise), *herstellen* (to produce, to set here), *darstellen* (to present or exhibit), and so on” (William Lovitt in Heidegger, “The Question concerning Technology,” 15n).

The connotations of setting in place and of supplying that lie within the word *stellen* remain strongly present in Heidegger's repeated use of the verb hereafter, however, since the "setting-upon" of which it speaks is inherently a setting in place so as to supply.¹⁶⁵

For Lovitt, then, the meaning of the connection between *stellen* and *herausfordern* turns on the importance of supply. Heidegger makes this clear when he argues that setting-upon as such is always directed toward further setting-upon, or toward the stockpiling of ever more energies and resources. The instrumental logic of setting-upon is formally identical to the accumulative logic of capital.

While Lovitt's translations of *stellen* and its associated forms make the connection to *herausfordern* clear, they downplay a second important connotation that Richard Rojcewicz makes explicit. Rojcewicz's lengthy interpretation of "Die Frage nach der Technik"¹⁶⁶ is full of important clarifications and exposition, and one of the most important of these concerns the translation of *stellen* not as "to place or set" but more generally as "to pose". This allows him to translate *stellen*'s associated forms in a similar (e.g. to impose, to dispose, to oppose, and so on), novel, and illuminating fashion, and thereby to emphasize different aspects of the text. Since these other aspects of the text will prove to be inextricably entwined with virtual boredom, I will summarize Rojcewicz's reading as it moves from the initial interpretation of *stellen* through to the translation of *Ge-stell* not as "Enframing" but as "all-encompassing imposition".

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶⁶ Richard Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology: A Reading of Heidegger* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006). Many authors have written on Heidegger's essay on technology at length, but Rojcewicz's work is unquestionably the most rigorous. For other book length monographs on "The Question concerning Technology" in English, see John Loscerbo, *Being and Technology: A Study in the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* (The Hague and Boston, MA: Nijhoff, 1981); William Lovitt and Harriet Brundage Lovitt, *Modern Technology in the Heideggerian Perspective* (Lewiston, NY: Mellen Press, 1995); and Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, and Art* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

The Four Characterizations of Modern Technology

In Rojcewicz's reading, modern technology is characterized first as a challenging, second as an imposition, third as a ravishment, and fourth as a disposing. Although the significance of "challenging" is not slight, Lovitt's translation of *herausfordern* is adequate, and I will bypass Rojcewicz's reading of it in order to focus on the other three senses of modern technology.

The second characterization of modern technology comes clear after *stellen* is reinterpreted as "to pose". This translation can certainly be understood in a neutral sense, but it "often bears the connotation of a *forceful* putting" – setting upon someone or something, or pressing upon someone. These are the senses of the term that Heidegger's essay conveys. While Lovitt's translation of the gerund *Stellen* as "setting upon" would be adequate, it would not accord with the translation of *stellen* as "to pose". Rojcewicz therefore translates *Stellen* as "imposition". The application of the term is clear from Heidegger's example of the traditional field versus the field of modern agribusiness. In Rojcewicz's translation, this passage reads: "the ordering of the field has been sucked into the maelstrom of a different sort of ordering, one that *imposes* on nature. It imposes on it in the sense of challenging it. Agriculture is now [the] mechanized foodstuffs industry". So, according to Rojcewicz, where "[t]he farmer of old submitted, tended, and nurtured", and thus brought forth "that with which nature [was] already pregnant", modern agriculture forces the soil to produce foodstuffs, and thus brings forth something that has only use value – no inherent value at all. Although this is worrisome, the most important thing about *Stellen* is not necessarily the direct, material consequences of our actions, e.g. the genetic manipulation of seeds, but rather the point of view that gave rise

to these actions in the first place. This perspective, or “disclosive looking”, precedes and enables the violent appropriation of the earth:¹⁶⁷ it is “the way of modern technology”, and it “amounts to seeing in nature energy as such, minable, hoardable, exploitable energy”.¹⁶⁸

The third characterization of modern technology depends on the translation of the verb *fördern*. Lovitt translates the word principally as “expedite”. For Rojcewicz, this term captures only the neutral connotation of *fördern*, giving us the sense of simply carrying something along. This misses the more forceful aspect of the term, which is clear from the context in which it is often used. “In mining”, writes Rojcewicz, “the term has a strong, violent sense: it characterizes the way coal is brought to the surface of the earth, not by being gently ‘promoted’ but by being ‘lugged out’”. Based on this and on the connection of *fördern* to *herausfordern* (challenging), Rojcewicz argues that “‘expedite’ is too weak”; he therefore employs a much stronger term: “[t]o expose and exploit is to rape. It is to force something (or someone) to relinquish its (or her) treasures”. He extends the argument for this strong translation, connecting rape to challenge and imposition: rape “is to take the other as merely there for one’s own satisfaction. To challenge is to demand satisfaction, and to rape is to obtain that satisfaction by force, by imposition, by pressing upon”. Even the word “rape” fails to fully convey the extremity of *fördern* in this context, since the act of exposing and exploiting something – in this case the earth – does not only aim at one’s satisfaction, but at leaving that which is exposed and exploited “wasted”. The intention of modern mining

¹⁶⁷ Rojcewicz clarifies: “[i]t is not *because* the earth is ravished that it now looks like a store of minerals; on the contrary, the earth comes to be ravished precisely because of the way we now *see* it. The disclosive looking comes first” (*The Gods and Technology*, 77).

¹⁶⁸ Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 75-78.

is to extract *all* of the earth's energy as efficiently as possible "for the sake of the unbridled satisfaction of human desires". It is for this reason that Rojcewicz translates *fördern* as "ravishment".¹⁶⁹

The fourth characterization of modern technology returns to the root word *stellen*. The key term here is *bestellen*, which means both to place *an* order and to place *in* order. The gerund *Bestellen* is normally translated as "order", and this term manages to convey the ambiguity that Heidegger intends. However, Rojcewicz notes that it does not convey the connection to *Stellen*, since no immediately evident connection exists between "setting upon" and "ordering". Additionally, "order" does not necessarily connect to the subject who carries out the ordering; it could just as easily relate to an institution (for example). Because *bestellen* should connect to *stellen* and because Heidegger elsewhere insists on the key position of the subject in the attitude of modern technology, Rojcewicz translates *bestellen* as "dispose".¹⁷⁰

Before discussing the material effects of *bestellen*, Rojcewicz steps back to emphasize the importance of *bestellen*'s perspectival and ontological function. Again,

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 78-80. This interpretation helps to explain Heidegger's well known assertion regarding the formal equivalence of the concentration camps and modern agriculture. While some might take this as an indication that Heidegger fundamentally did not understand the horrors perpetrated by the Nazis (and hence, indirectly, by him), this supremely violent and solipsistic interpretation of modern technology as ravishment, as worse than rape, shows that he in fact understood these horrors quite well, and was furthermore able to discern a frightening extension of the logic of the camps – or, better, of the logic of modern technology. The camps can be seen as an expression of modern technology rather than as the expression of an unprecedented horror because the logic or the disclosive look of modern technology precedes individual technologies. Heidegger's thinking here clearly complements or precedes the work of others who have written on the instrumental character of the Holocaust (particularly Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006) and Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998)). None of this is to say that we should necessarily understand the comment as an apology or an admitting of culpability; indeed, by placing the responsibility for the essence of modern technology principally with Being, Heidegger might be denying the possibility of human culpability in general. Given the complexity and intensity of the debate and its relative unimportance for my appropriation of his thinking on boredom and technology, I deliberately avoid offering an interpretation of Heidegger's Nazism in this dissertation.

¹⁷⁰ Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 80-81.

for Heidegger, looking precedes acting. Rojcewicz explains what Heidegger means by interrogating the phrase “*das bestellende Entbergen*”, which is deployed three times in the text, and which Lovitt translates as an “ordering revealing”. To retain the connection to *Stellen*/posing, Rojcewicz translates the phrase as “a disclosive looking that disposes”. This translation provides two connotations. In the first, disposing means simply “using at will”, which “is here just another name for the imperious attitude Heidegger has already ascribed to modern technology”. In the second, disposing means the defined seeing, arranging, and assigning of things; it means the ordering of things. More specifically, disposing means the ordering of things according to the dictums of reason, science, or mathematics, which, Rojcewicz insists, can be reduced to calculability. He emphasizes this point because it indicates how we understand “the essence of things” or “the Being of beings”:¹⁷¹ the disclosive looking of modern technology disposes things in a calculable order, and in so doing, or because of so doing, it renders Being calculable. In its effects, this is an ontological account of the world. The complete comprehensibility of this worldview and the severity of the challenging, imposition, ravishment, and disposal that follow indicate this ontological depth. The solidly historical phenomenon of the spread of calculation – the way, for instance, that human life is tallied up in censuses, guarded against viral outbreaks by epidemiology, or assigned a monetary value through actuarial science – gives rise to effects that are at once indirect and profound.

As serious a concern as calculability in general is, it does not explain with precision *how* modern technology reveals and orders the world. The real innovation of Rojcewicz’s translation becomes apparent in his explanation of the character of this

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 81-82.

revealing, and it relates first to the central term *Bestand*. This is the past participle, gerund form of the verb *stehen*, which is closely related to *stellen*.¹⁷² *Bestand* therefore connotes something different than before – something not entirely captured by the four ways in which modern technology was described, all of which related, directly or indirectly, to *stellen*.

Lovitt's translation of *Bestand* as "standing-reserve" captures the usual German connotations of the term, including "inventory" and "stock-piled resources". "Standing-reserve", however, fails to capture a number of vital nuances that become clear when "disposables" is substituted in its place. The immediate connotations are twofold. First, if the things of the world are disposable, they lie at our disposal: they are there for us to use. "Secondly, and more significantly, things... are also viewed as disposable in the sense of discardable". We use things, certainly, but when we are done with them we simply throw them away. Things, and particularly "[t]he things of nature", are therefore "not only consumables", which is what "standing-reserve" would suggest, but also *disposables*. We therefore "need feel no compunction about ravishing them and leaving them wasted".¹⁷³ When the word "disposables" is used to translate *Bestand*, it bears the four characterizations of modern technology: challenging, imposing, ravishing, and disposing.

Burdened with these four characterizations, the two connotations of disposability – lying in disposal and being discardable – are certainly troublesome. They also relate directly to a number of digital phenomena (the absolute availability of the digital and the forgettable quality or disposability of that which is found online) that I will discuss

¹⁷² Where *stellen* means to set something in place or pose, *stehen* means to stand, or that a thing stands.

¹⁷³ Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 83-84.

shortly. Beyond this, however, the translation of *Bestand* as “disposables” tells us something vital about the basic way that we see the world today. According to Rojcewicz, the basic point that Heidegger is making “is this: if all things are disposables, then nothing has a permanent footing”. The things of nature, which “can be discarded at will.... have thereby taken on an ephemeral quality; they appear to lack stability and permanence”.¹⁷⁴ Supplies – the simple standing-reserve – lack stability too, but they neither imply anything about *our* condition, i.e. the way that the world rests on a “peculiar footing”¹⁷⁵ as a result of the increasing sway of the technological worldview, nor sufficiently connote the fundamental disrespect exhibited when things are treated as disposable. When Heidegger says that “[d]as Wort [Bestand] sagt hier mehr und Wesentlicheres als nur «Vorrat»”,¹⁷⁶ he means to indicate the disrespect and ephemeral character inherent in this “stock”.

The source and implications of the “peculiar footing” of disposables – the shaky quality imbued to things by our technological view of them – are not entirely clear. They rest on the opposition of *Bestand* to *Gegenstand*.¹⁷⁷ Lovitt translates *Gegenstand* as “object”, but this raises the question of the difference between *Bestand* and *Gegenstand*: are the things included in the standing-reserve – the stockpile of resources – not “objects”? Waiting upon the desires of subjects, they certainly seem to have the characteristics of objects. But if they are objects, then in what sense do they differ from

¹⁷⁴ Ibid, 85.

¹⁷⁵ Lovitt translates *eigenen Stand* as “own standing” (Heidegger, “The Question concerning Technology,” 17), while Rojcewicz’s “peculiar footing” bestows *Stand* with the grounding sense normally accorded to *Grund*.

¹⁷⁶ Martin Heidegger, “Die Frage nach der Technik,” in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Pfullingen: Verlag Günter Neske, 1994), 17.

¹⁷⁷ “Was im Sinne des Bestandes steht, steht uns nicht mehr als Gegenstand gegenüber” (Ibid, 20).

the standing-reserve? Rojcewicz's translation of *Bestand* as "disposables" proves helpful after he clarifies the meaning of *Gegenstand*. The word is normally translated, as Lovitt translates it, as "object", but since the term is supposed to differ radically from *Bestand*, it makes more sense to emphasize the *standing* of *Gegenstand* than its prepositional (*gegen*) relationship to us: "Heidegger means by this term something that has its own autonomous standing". Rojcewicz insists that the translation of *Gegenstand* as "object" is in fact completely incorrect, since the etymology of "object" – its inherent and subordinate connection to the subject – runs counter to the autonomous sense that Heidegger intends. (When the term appears explicitly, Lovitt certainly translates *selbständig* as "autonomous", but his translation of *Gegenstand* as "object" confuses the issue.) So *Bestand*, which is disposable and necessarily related to the subject that disposes, is precisely other than *Gegenstand*, which is not disposable and bears no necessary relationship to any subject. *Gegenstand* is autonomous, standing on its own; *Bestand* is non-autonomous, standing only in relation to the human subject. In a certain sense *Bestand* is therefore less "stable"; it stands, as Rojcewicz writes, on a "peculiar footing". This footing is particularly unstable because all of the things that have the character of *Bestand* are ultimately disposable, existing only for so long as we find convenient.¹⁷⁸

Disposal; Boredom; Response

¹⁷⁸ Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 85.

The foundational instability of *Bestand* is perhaps why Heidegger suggests that *das bestellende Entbergen* is characterized principally by regulating and securing:¹⁷⁹ if everything is, at a foundational level, without foundation, then the technological gaze that challengingly reveals or disposingly discloses needs to secure these things so that they do not suddenly disappear. Nothing would be worse for the disposing subject than that the disposable things of the world become unavailable for disposal. This is precisely what happens in boredom: the subject finds himself or herself at the disposal of the world rather than the other way around. In the train station, he or she must sit and wait for the train. The subject has no recourse to disposable diversion, finding himself or herself bored in part by the lack of control over the world. The response is therefore to secure himself or herself against those sorts of situations by regulating them technologically: bring a laptop or a smart phone and the problem of boredom – the lack of control – disappears.

But technology is not a straightforward answer to boredom. Although it secures the subject against becoming bored by an object, it does not stop boredom from arising from within one's own activities. Just the opposite, in fact: technology fosters the second form of boredom. This is apparent from the disposable quality of the things in which we interest ourselves. Browsing the internet is almost always a meaningless activity, given the interchangeableness of one link with another. After an hour or two of reading news articles and commentary, a person forgets what she has read: the words are discovered, consumed, discarded, and forgotten. And the discarding is completely unconscious, since in moving from one article to another, the reader disposes of the first without even

¹⁷⁹ Heidegger, "The Question concerning Technology," 16.

thinking about it as an autonomous thing that *could* be disposed of. The very purpose of such stories is disposal. And the medium, screen based as it is, lends its contents another layer of impermanence, further entrenching their disposability. The essence of the interest that lies at the heart of virtual boredom is therefore disposability. That which is merely “interesting” is, at its heart, *disposable*.

Our responses to this disposability are telling. Just as the technological gaze discloses the world as something disposable and responds by attempting to secure it against premature disposal, the interested eye discloses the virtual world as disposable and responds by imbuing it with more permanence and value than it could possibly contain – permanence and value expressed, for instance, in the genuine enthusiasm that people muster in responding to something as materially insignificant as a Twitter post. Additionally, and vitally, the interested eye responds to the threat of boredom, which is the same as the threat of premature disposal, by bringing an ever greater collection of things into the sphere of disposability. One mode of securing oneself against the boredom that might creep up on a person after hours of browsing is to ensure that more and further browsing is always possible. Everything must be accessible through the internet. The medium enables this immediate and absolute spread: it is the internet that allows a person to play games; to watch videos, and download them *en masse* for future viewing; to talk to friends and strangers; to read, to write; to engage with an augmented representation of every part of the world (which is so much more than the bare life of the natural world) with what might, from a temporal outsider’s perspective, be a breathtaking immediacy but which is, for us, entirely routine. This is why a person’s connection speed is so important: a modem should transmit information precisely as fast as is necessary to

bring the world to the monitor without providing the possibility for boredom to set in. If everything lies immediately at our disposal, then we will not become bored, and we will not have to confront the existential anxiety of a world without foundation.

But again, this response – bringing everything to the screen – proves to be inadequate to the task of staving off boredom. When everything is brought together as a collection of links, everything comes to feel similar. All of the different things of the internet are partially reduced to a sameness when they are presented through an identical medium. This comparatively profound boredom is apparent everywhere – on Facebook, where little difference is made between my close friends and my acquaintances; on Reddit, where everything can be voted up or down; and on 4chan, where one post blends into another with a very literal obscenity and speed. This sameness is unconsciously recognized and met with a set of structural responses that are designed to institute difference (profiles are designed for the perfect expression of individuality, subreddits can be chosen to reflect the interests of the individual user, and simply partaking in a discussion on 4chan marks its user as radically different from the mainstream). These institutions of difference are sometimes subtle and sometimes overt, but they tend (as I argue particularly in the chapter concerning Reddit) to extremes. When everything in the world becomes similarly disposable, the response on the part of the disposing subject, who fears, consciously or not, that she too has become insignificant, is to cast about for individuality or identity or any kind of certainty at all.

While the response to the threat of boredom according to which the world is brought to the screen proves inadequate to the task of staving off boredom, it proves perfectly adequate to the unconscious task of rendering the world disposable. The

internet spreads the technological gaze that Heidegger describes, bringing everything within its sphere, linking things together, and thereby rendering them disposable. One of the problems here is apparent in what I just mentioned: the “everything” that becomes disposable includes the subject herself. This is part of the “danger” that Heidegger describes in the second half of his essay, where the ontical effects associated with technology (and boredom) become ontologized.

3.2: Browsing Being

Ge-stell as All-Encompassing Imposition

After clarifying the meaning of *Bestand*, Heidegger suggests that the point of the essay “is now coming to utterance” and asks, in a way that connects with this passive phrasing, about the agent responsible for “accomplishing” *Bestand*. Although he suggests that “man” might seem responsible for disposing of things, he quickly notes that man has no control over the initial way that the world is revealed as something disposable. Man is born into a world governed by a particular way of seeing, or by a particular set of epistemological limits that correspond today to the disclosure of disposability. Man, in other words, “is already challenged to exploit the energies of nature”, and his ability to challenge the world is governed by the extent to which he is so challenged. And he is, of course, challenged specifically by technology, to be understood as disposability: he is to treat the things of the world as if they were discardable. Technology challenges him to challenge things.

Furthermore, the things of the world might well include *human* things, meaning that there might be nothing at all particularly significant about the human in the context of modern technology. Heidegger raises here the dystopian concern that we are, in approximate terms, losing our freedom. He immediately gives the lie to this concern, however, noting that it is precisely because this loss has the possibility of registering for us *as* a loss that man “never is transformed into mere standing-reserve [*Bestand*]”. His possibilities are delimited to a great extent by the sway of modern technology, but he retains some form of autonomy.¹⁸⁰ As Heidegger will say later in the essay, man acts according to a destining of Being, but not according to a destiny.¹⁸¹

The simple point of the above is that the human does not *accomplish* modern technology. Something else – Heidegger characterizes it here as “[t]hat which has already claimed man” – is responsible. However, while we could anticipate Heidegger’s argument, responding to his question about responsibility by simply saying that “Being accomplishes modern technology”, this would lack meaning. “Being” is “responsible” for everything, so it would seem both mystical and pointless to ascribe modern technology to it. Heidegger avoids this direct ascription of responsibility, approaching the question of the accomplishment of modern technology instead from the perspective of the way that it is revealed:

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 17-18. This description lacks a great deal of nuance; Heidegger is certainly talking about freedom, but he is doing so in a way that bears little relation to the conceptualizations of freedom that might be familiar from political philosophy, given its focus on the human’s relationship to unconcealment. Rojcewicz is again helpful here, spending seven pages on an exegesis of two paragraphs (*The Gods and Technology*, 90-97).

¹⁸¹ Heidegger, “The Question concerning Technology,” 25. Rojcewicz rejects the term “destining”, but in doing so he loses this easy, shorthand way of indicating the limited autonomy of the human. His detailed exposition of Heidegger’s understanding of freedom (in “Part III: The Danger in Modern Technology,” 127-83) more than makes up for this, but since I do not recapitulate this exposition, I will make recourse to the word “destining”.

Modern technology as an ordering revealing is, then, no merely human doing. Therefore we must take that challenging that sets upon man to order the real as standing-reserve in accordance with the way in which it shows itself. That challenging gathers man into ordering. This gathering concentrates man upon ordering the real as standing-reserve.¹⁸²

The above passage is perplexing. Heidegger intends it to serve as the final, indirect, preparatory step to be accomplished before positively characterizing the essence of modern technology (for he has, to this point, mostly described modern technology in terms of what it is not). Rojcewicz clarifies its sense, but does so by first transforming Lovitt's translation:

In this way, then, modern technology, as a disclosive looking which disposes, is not a merely human doing. Therefore we must also take that challenging which imposes on humans to dispose of realities as disposables just as it shows itself. That challenging encompasses the disposing of things on the part of humans. This encompassing concentrates humans on disposing of realities as disposables.¹⁸³

While Rojcewicz makes changes to a number of terms, the most important is to the German word *Versammeln*, which Lovitt translates as “gathering”. Rojcewicz advances a number of possible translations, all of which lend a slightly different flavour to the text – “concentration” and “focusing” convey the inward extension of modern technology, and “rallying” suggests both summoning in place and rousing to action – but he settles on “encompassing” because it captures all of these meanings, including that of “gathering”, and also adds the meaning of accomplishment: “to encompass something means to accomplish it, bring it about”. When Heidegger indirectly suggests that Being “encompasses” modern technology, then, he means both that modern technology *takes*

¹⁸² Heidegger, “The Question concerning Technology,” 19.

¹⁸³ Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 99.

place within Being and that “Being itself *accomplishes* modern technology”. It does so with the “help” of humans, but it does so in a forceful (concentrating, rallying) fashion.¹⁸⁴

Including this twofold conception of encompassing is “the final preparatory step in determining the proper name for Being in our epoch”, since it “allows us to characterize the current sense of Being”.¹⁸⁵ Rojcewicz gathers together Heidegger’s three principal characterizations of this sense¹⁸⁶ in order to argue that Being “now possesses the sense of an *all-encompassing imposition*”. Both of these words have a double sense: “imposition” is double since two impositions take place under modern technology – Being imposes on the human and the human imposes on nature – and “encompassing” is double since Being encompasses both of these impositions in the two senses of including them and accomplishing them.¹⁸⁷

Heidegger assigns the term *Ge-stell* to this characterization of Being. The term is familiar to anyone who has read the essay, albeit in its translation as “Enframing”. Lovitt’s translation has much to recommend it, and Rojcewicz agrees, since the term connects etymologically to the German *Gestell* (which describes stands or frames) and

¹⁸⁴ Ibid, 100-101.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 101.

¹⁸⁶ Being is: 1) “that challenging claim which encompasses humans by imposing on them to take as disposable the things that are disclosing themselves as disposables”; 2) “the encompassing of that imposition which imposes on humans – i.e., challenges them – to impose on reality in turn and thereby to look disclosively upon reality as composed of disposables”; and 3) “the encompassing of that imposition which imposes on humans to look disclosively upon reality as composed of disposables, which humans do by way of an imposition” (Heidegger translated in Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 101).

¹⁸⁷ Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 101. With less semantic but possibly more etymological continuity, Rojcewicz suggests that this characterization can also be rendered “‘original collection’ of impositions”: “[a]s a *collection*, Being encompasses the impositions in the first sense of encompassing, the sense of embracing within a larger whole; as *original*, Being encompasses the impositions in a second sense: Being is the source of the impositions, their springboard, the collected origin from which all individual impositions subsequently spread out” (Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 102).

provides a number of useful connotations around framing.¹⁸⁸ That said, “Enframing” bears no relationship to “all-encompassing imposition”, and Heidegger separates *Ge-* from *stell* very deliberately, both to distinguish it from its ordinary sense and to connote the original collection of impositions that Rojcewicz speaks about. Perhaps more significantly, the idea of Enframing strikes the reader as something separate from Being – for why would Being, which does not seem inherently malignant, do something as forceful as Enframing? Capitalizing the term, as Lovitt does, reinforces the feeling that Enframing is something moralistically opposed to Being in the same way that Satan is opposed to God. This is certainly not Lovitt’s intention, but it is an easy misreading given the translation. Translated differently, *Ge-stell*, like the other words in German that begin with the *ge-* prefix, should instead connote a collective ground that is the precondition for the things collected: just as *Ge-miit* is the general collection of temperaments that enables individual feelings, including *Mut*, *Ge-stell* is the general collection of impositions that enables individual impositions. As such a gathering place, *Ge-stell* is easily thought of as equivalent to Being (albeit in the historico-ontological guise of *Ge-stell*).¹⁸⁹

So: *Ge-stell* names the all-encompassing imposition that has been characterized above. It is closely associated with, or even equivalent to, the essence of modern technology.¹⁹⁰ Furthermore, Being encompasses *Ge-stell*, meaning that Being both

¹⁸⁸ “Enframing” gives the sense that “in the age of modern technology beings are given to us configured in a certain way (as use objects) and we are ourselves imperiously called to take them under that configuration. The ‘enframing’ amounts to this, that just as the frame of ribs gives an umbrella its shape, and our frame of bones gives us our shape, so things today appear in a certain shape because they are enframed in a certain way, namely as there merely for our use” (Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 103-104).

¹⁸⁹ Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 102-105.

¹⁹⁰ Heidegger equivocates slightly on this point, at times saying that *Ge-stell* is the essence of modern technology and at other times saying that modern technology rests on *Ge-stell*. Rojcewicz argues that all

accomplishes *Ge-stell* and provides the ground on which individual impositions can gather. *Ge-stell* holds sway over the human and thereby over the world, but the human retains some form of autonomy, as yet unclear. Perhaps most importantly, *Ge-stell* is not a particular technological thing – not one master imposition reigning over many – but a way of disclosing the world as something that is disposable, or something that is, in its essence, to be imposed upon. As such a revealing, *Ge-stell* names the contemporary guise of Being. It is an ontological seeming – a mode of looking that discloses the world in a disposable fashion, or discloses the world *as* something disposable. Given *Ge-stell*, the world *is* so disposable. *Ge-stell* is thus not an epistemology or, even more weakly, a worldview that might be altered or contested; it threatens to become the world.

Binary Logic

Since *Ge-stell* is synonymous with Being, and since *Ge-stell* is characterized in large part by the disposability that it imparts to beings, Being itself can be understood in terms of disposability. Furthermore, since disposability is linked in its essence to boredom, Being can now be understood more specifically in terms of boredom. Being expresses itself as something fundamentally boring (on the one hand) or interesting (on the other) – as comprised of objects that are to be used, certainly, but also as comprised of objects that are to be turned to for entertainment. To put it another way, Being reveals itself principally as a collection of things to be browsed. Given *Ge-stell*, things are arrayed on screens, perfectly controlled and perfectly attendant, demanding nothing of

readings are tenable, and suggests that they can be understood in a corporeal sense: “modern technology embodies Being” (*The Gods and Technology*, 107). This argument gives rise to a range of implications, particularly given the digitality of contemporary technology.

the person that browses. But they threaten a *loss* all the same, since, by the virtue of their virtual presence, the things of boredom worry the browser with the unconscious possibility of their disappearance. In being reduced to a boring thing on the one hand or an interesting thing on the other, the world does not ensure distraction; it *suggests* that entertainment waits a link or two away and that boredom can always be staved off, in principle, a little bit longer, but it makes no *promise* of eternal entertainment. And with nothing outside of this binary – with everything reduced to the status of boring or interesting – the browser experiences the worry that the interesting will one day run out, or will simply stop being interesting.¹⁹¹

This is the absurd, dystopian fear that *Ge-stell*, coded today as an all-embracing encompassment not only of the worldview of imposition but the more specific worldview of virtual boredom, will make it impossible to see the world in terms that exceed the boring/interesting binary. This fear presents itself as absurd because it suggests that the browser will consciously decide that something should be taken as boring or interesting – that she will move through the world explicitly upvoting and downvoting as she goes. Clearly, this will not come to pass. Even with the extension of the web to the world by way of mobile technologies (by way, for instance, of augmented reality applications that allow people to provide online evaluations of real world establishments), there remains a more or less absolute division between the real and the virtual. Reality is, or at least seems to be, fundamentally *not* augmented (which is why the evaluation-augmentation of the sort enabled by Yelp, for instance, is possible).

¹⁹¹ Everyone has experienced the gradual onset of boredom with a website; it is the reason that Friendster gave way to MySpace and MySpace gave way to Facebook and Facebook may give way to something else.

Now, although our basic outlook does not include the explicit evaluation of particular worldly things, the dystopia within the apparent absurdity of the encompassment of boredom is not located in ontical details but in the ontological *view of the world* that *pre-codes* it as something that *can* be judged. This is analogous to Heidegger's concern regarding *Ge-stell* taken in its broader terms as all-encompassing imposition. At one level, Heidegger's fears (which I discuss in greater detail in the next section) are clearly absurd: people generally do not, and will not, go through the world consciously calculating the use value of things. They will not become utterly unable to step outside of the need to reduce the world to a collection of instruments; they will not forget that the people in their lives are more than means to a subjective end. But reading Heidegger's fears about calculability in this way does him an injustice, since he is not in fact worried about the spread of calculability to particular things – even to many things. Indeed, he consistently acknowledges that people must generally proceed through the world in a calculable frame of mind.¹⁹² His concern is instead that, first, the perspective of calculability will make impossible any other perspectives and, second, the entrenchment of this perspective will blind calculability to its most basic assumption – i.e., that the world is essentially coherent, and that we are capable of fundamentally understanding it on this basis. Considering the current status of physics, for instance – even after Heisenberg¹⁹³ – and considering the importance of this physical worldview for all the other sciences, this fear does not seem so unreasonable.

¹⁹² This acknowledgement can certainly be seen throughout “The Question concerning Technology”, but it can also be seen in a different form in *Being and Time*, where Heidegger argues that people must generally comport themselves to the world in an inauthentic fashion, and that there is nothing wrong with this (*Being and Time*, 175).

¹⁹³ Heidegger's essay is explicitly concerned with Heisenberg's depiction of science as necessarily abstracted from its objects (see Werner Heisenberg, “Das Naturbild der heutigen Physik,” in *Die Künste im*

The fear about the reduction of the world to the boredom/interest binary should be understood in the similarly broad, perspectival terms of the pre-coding discussed above. *Ge-stell*, in its expression as virtual boredom, does not draw its dystopian strength from any particular upvote or downvote but from the basic way that it frames the world (to return to Lovitt's useful phrasing). This frame can certainly be thought of in terms of disposability: the world is seen to be composed of disposables. Additionally, however, this frame has the more obviously (and ontically) technological character of *binarism*. The things of the world can be thought of as either interesting or boring – as on or off – because we have become disposed to understanding the world in the terms of the computer.¹⁹⁴ And today, we are becoming disposed to looking at the world not only in terms of disposability and all that implies or even in the general binaries associated with the computer, but in the specific disposable, binaric, and evaluative terms of social media – the interesting and the boring. This is an incipient change that is only beginning to become discernible.

Now, does the spread of the generalized binaric, disposable looking of the regime of computation seem any less absurd or dystopian than the more specific spread of the boredom associated with social media? Is it more believable? The answer is yes –

technischen Zeitalter, 43-69 (München: Oldenbourg, 1954), cited in Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 235). Rojcewicz interprets Heidegger here as suggesting that “physics may no longer provide a picture of nature, physics may not even care what – if anything – it does picture, but physics can never abandon the goal of providing a *coherent* picture”. This is because “such a picture is required by disposability, and science, as the human response to the current self-disclosure of Being, can never renounce disposability” (Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 122).

¹⁹⁴ This specific computational perspective did not precede modern science, as Heidegger argues was the case for *Ge-stell* as such (Heidegger, “The Question concerning Technology,” 21-23); it is a mode of disclosive looking that is tied to *Ge-stell*, but it is not entirely separable from individual technologies. Rather, the “regime of computation” arose at the same time as the computer, or at least at the same time that the conceptual groundwork for the computer, i.e. cybernetics, was being laid. N. Katherine Hayles discusses the regime of computation in *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and the cybernetic history that gave rise to this regime in *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

although boredom cannot be so easily separated from the computational binary. The key here is not the widely acknowledged spread of separating and subordinating binaries like good/evil, West/East, or male/female. Nor is the importance of the regime of computation to be found in the literally binaric code of the computer. Rather, the key to this form of disclosive looking, and to the question of the absurdity and dystopia of its spread, is the nature of the movement *between* the elements of the binary – i.e. the drive to *distraction*. Interest may be divided from and “superior” to boredom in the same way that the good is superior to the evil, but the interesting necessarily gives way to the boring in a way that more recognizable binaries do not. The binary of boredom is inherently and immediately unstable, characterized by a constant transition between the polar states – and this is, again, the product of the medium, which encourages this constant movement by way of hypertext. More broadly, the binary of boredom applies to the formal level while the binaries identified by poststructuralism apply more to content, meaning that anything can (and will) be easily characterized as interesting or boring, while not just anything can be characterized as male or female. The binary of boredom is all-encompassing in the same fashion as the impositions of *Ge-stell*, but it differs in the specific way that it unsettles those things in its sway, not only rendering them disposable, but demanding that the response to a disposed, uninteresting thing is its immediate replacement. This drive to distraction is apparent in the calls for attention that issue today from all media – the need not only for the spectator to find a spectacle, but the spectacle to find a spectator.

Danger; Boredom; Response

The spread of the binary of boredom may seem slightly absurd, but it should also be eminently recognizable. Even so, the question of the “dystopian” character of the binary of boredom remains unclear – as does Heidegger’s characterization of the broader danger posed by *Ge-stell*. This characterization makes sense when *Ge-stell* is considered from the more formal perspective of the possibilities open to the bored subject.

As a fundamentally boring worldview, *Ge-stell* represents the simultaneous opening and closure of possibilities. Both opening and closure are wrapped up with what Lovitt calls “destining”. In using this term to translate *Geschick*, Lovitt intends to convey something other than “destiny”, i.e. something other than a fate; indeed, for Heidegger, “destining is never a fate that compels”. But neither is destining intended to convey a sense of absolute freedom, which, for Heidegger, is “not connected with the will or even with the causality of human willing”. Put simply, “destining” should give us the sense that we live within well delimited constraints, conceivable in any number of different ways, but certainly epistemologically: there are things that we simply cannot imagine, and therefore cannot do. These things are written out of possibility (while others are written into possibility) by the way that Being reveals or conceals itself which is based on the way that Being *has* revealed or concealed itself in the past and “sent” itself into the present. In the modern, technological epoch, our imagination is bound by *Ge-stell*, and, given Heidegger’s criticism of *Ge-stell*, it is easy to conceive of these constraints in an entirely negative sense – i.e. we could imagine that *Ge-stell* simply writes more positive possibilities out of existence. But destining constrains the human in all epochs – not just

the modern one: just as we are bound by *Ge-stell*, the Greeks were bound, albeit in an entirely different sense, by *poiēsis*.¹⁹⁵

So Heidegger is not worried about the fact that *Ge-stell* imposes constraints on possibilities. Instead, he is worried that this particular set of constraints will become the *only* set of constraints that we can imagine, and that, furthermore, it will not be discernible *as* a set of constraints. Being both reveals (*Ge-stell*) and conceals (*poiēsis*), and there is no necessary reason for humans to pursue that which is concealed. For the Greeks, Being revealed the world according to *poiēsis*, and *poiēsis* thereby held sway, concealing unknown other possibilities. For we moderns, Being reveals the world according to *Ge-stell*, concealing *poiēsis* (at the least).¹⁹⁶ All this makes sense within Heidegger's conception of destining: all destinings necessarily conceal some possibilities while revealing others. This can be construed as a danger. However, Heidegger characterizes the danger that accompanies *Ge-stell* as "supreme", and offers two reasons for this supremacy.

The first reason is a nutshell account of the consummation of nihilism: in seeing the world in the terms of disposability alone, the human "comes to the point where he himself will have to be taken as standing-reserve [*Bestand*]. Meanwhile man, precisely as the one so threatened, exalts himself to the posture of lord of the earth".¹⁹⁷ Disposability renders *everything* disposable, ultimately including the subject that disposes. The disposing subject vacillates between thinking that he is master over the disposable world and fearing that he is just as disposable as the things of the world.

¹⁹⁵ Heidegger, "The Question concerning Technology," 24-25.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, 25-26.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 27.

Furthermore, “[t]his illusion gives rise in turn to one final delusion: It seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself”, even though “*precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself, i.e., his essence*”.¹⁹⁸ The solipsism of disposability operates on a purely superficial level, dictating that things are only ever disconnected, non-contextual things.

The second reason for the supremacy of the danger is more severe, since it deals not only with a series of changes to the nature of the human but the change, indicated above, to the manner in which Being reveals itself: the “regulating and securing of the standing-reserve [*Bestand*] mark all revealing. They no longer even let their own fundamental characteristic appear, namely, this revealing as such”.¹⁹⁹ To rephrase in the perspectival terms deployed before, Heidegger is saying that since *Ge-stell* holds sway over everything not at the (ontical) level of the things themselves but at the (ontological) level of the way that the things can be seen in the first place, these things are no longer *seen as* disposables, but rather *simply are* disposables. The supreme danger is that the worldview of disposability becomes a world of disposables, or that the “view” is permanently, irrevocably erased. This would be an erasing not only of disposable things, but of perspective (revealing) and context (Being) as such: “the challenging Enframing [*Ge-stell*] not only conceals a former way of revealing, bringing-forth, but it conceals revealing itself and with it That wherein unconcealment, i.e., truth, comes to pass”.²⁰⁰

Heidegger’s delineation of the supremacy of the danger posed by *Ge-stell* can no doubt be put in more rich and complicated terms that would highlight, for instance, the

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

analytical importance of Dasein's freedom, but the rough sketch above provides enough substance for a reframing of the danger posed by the binary of boredom. The first danger is that we are becoming deluded into thinking that we are the masters of everything. In the terms of boredom, this means that we have the illusion of controlling everything from the vantage point of the ergonomic chair. The world is (seen through the window of) the computer screen alone; as such, it can be controlled. Willingly trapped in front of this screen, I do nothing but surf. I sit, play, become bored, and look for further distractions, which offer themselves up with ease. This vacillation between interest and boredom means capture, and this capture means repetition – the repetitive performance of the binary of boredom. This in turn gives rise to long periods during which I feel a strong sense of mastery; however, this is almost inevitably followed by the recrimination of feeling that I am not the master but the mastered. Given a sufficiently long period spent alternating between these dramatic feelings, first disposing and then disposed, my sense of self worth plummets. This is a nihilism that is consummated principally at the level of the disposing subject and that suggests radical effects for the objects beyond: the world (of the screen) is a disconnected series of interesting and boring things, interconnected only to the extent that I deign to click on them and contextualized only within my pursuit of distraction. I see only myself in these things, but I see no value at all in myself.

This ontical capture has precisely the ontological effects that Heidegger fears, although they express themselves in a more frenetic fashion. For Heidegger, the second, supreme danger posed by *Ge-stell* is that we will become incapable of seeing the worldview of modern technology *as* a worldview and come to see it simply as world. In the terms of boredom, this means that there can be no alternative to evaluating things as

either interesting or boring: everything is coded in the same fashion, and no meaning inheres in things. This results in the passionate movement between the extremes of loving that which has given rise to this binary and hating it. This swing between extremes is an indirect result of the nihilism discussed above. When I have the impression of mastery over the world, I unconsciously suspect that my freedom is absolute; however, when I curse myself for my slavery to distractions, I suspect that I am entirely determined. I am either entirely in control or entirely controlled. These two suspicions are clearly absurd exaggerations, and as such, they have something in common: although they are opposites, “they are merely complementary expressions of the same basic outlook, namely, a rigid, all-or-nothing attitude”. For Rojcewicz, these exaggerations “exemplify the oppositional, confrontational attitude of modern technology” because they suggest that the world is composed *only of things* – not relationships or context, but things.²⁰¹ Since these things are controlled by simple mechanics, every act must be simply controlled. I am either completely in control or completely controlled. This is a perspective that excludes the possibility of any kind of complicating context that might give the lie to mechanical simplicity and a binary conception of freedom and the possibility to dispose of inherently valuable things, and that also throws the subject from one state (controlling) to another (controlled) without explanation or discernible transition. Thrown back and forth, I find myself first passionately loving the internet and then passionately hating it.²⁰²

²⁰¹ Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 149-50.

²⁰² Rojcewicz notes that these passions, taken more generally, are an explicit problem for Heidegger: “passion is intrinsic to our current attitude toward technology; we cannot avoid being passionate about it. To be passionate means to be headlong, blind to compromise or alternatives. According to Heidegger, the holding sway of imposition dispossesses the alternative to an all-or-nothing attitude, namely, *poiesis*. Consequently,

These passionate affirmations and denials give rise to two connected effects. First, they enact a subjection: the subject alternates between the interest/love and boredom/hatred of the binary, and finds herself constructed out of this alternation. Second, in keeping the subject occupied, the passions also cover over the fact of their function. That is to say: just as *Ge-stell*, at its most dangerous, conceals the way that it conceals and reveals, so does virtual boredom, at *its* most dangerous, conceal its binary operation. The key to understanding the boredom of the internet is revealing its technological and ontological underpinning, which finds expression in the alternation between polar states – the on and off, the interesting and boring. The problem with coming to this understanding is that the internet, like *Ge-stell*, operates most efficiently when the subject is unaware of the nature of its operation. The internet imposes itself on people – subjects them – so that it can more effectively impose itself on more people. Like *Ge-stell*, it operates according to a logic of ever greater accumulation, but the “Moses and the prophets” of the binary of boredom is the accumulation neither of capital nor of disposables; it is instead the accumulation of people and things within a digital domain. Digitization – the accumulation of the binary age – is the encompassment of the world within the binary of boredom and the maintenance of the subject in a perpetual status of polar alternation. *Ge-stell* manifests itself in and around the binary.

The “dangers” associated with the current guise of *Ge-stell* are clearly multiple, but that is the only clear thing about them: they operate at several ontological registers and give rise to a number of different effects. We might therefore expect that any response to them would be similarly complicated and, at this stage, unclear. However, if

our attitude toward modern technology, as long as imposition holds sway, is bound to be passionate” (Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 150).

we simplified the dangers – abstracted them out to the broader level of modern technology rather than the specific level of social media – we might find a simpler response. Rojcewicz offers an interpretation of Heidegger’s abstract response that is both compelling and problematic – and problematic not only because it does not grapple with the rather particular concerns of social media (which would obviously be a ridiculous criticism) but because it slightly misinterprets Heidegger’s history of Being on the basis of an overvaluation of one side of the ontological difference. It is to this interpretation that I now turn.

The Occultation and Recuperation of Poiēsis

The supreme danger posed by *Ge-stell* is the concealment of concealing, or the loss of perspective on perspective, or the erasing of the view in worldview, and so on. Put it any of these ways, the concern that we should have about the disclosive looking of modern technology is that it will become ontologized. This is the broadest way of describing the supreme danger. However, there is a more specific danger that is the consequence of the ascendance of modern technology: *Ge-stell* deposes *poiēsis*. In fact, given its sway, *Ge-stell* has already deposed *poiēsis*. The two perspectives on the world – the two worlds – cannot exist simultaneously. A single mode of disclosive looking reigns in any given epoch, and, in Rojcewicz’s interpretation of Heidegger, there are only two epochs: the Greek and the modern. So, “when imposition holds sway, *poiesis* no longer even presents itself as a possibility”.²⁰³ At first this seems extreme, given the

²⁰³ Rojcewicz omits the diacritical marks in *poiēsis* and other Greek terms.

existence of “poetic” things and perspectives. Not all of our looking on the world is impositional. But Rojcewicz reiterates something that Heidegger pointed to at the beginning of the essay in order to demonstrate the truth of the deposal, namely that no one today takes the four causes seriously. Everyone knows the world can be reduced to a set of mechanistic provisions. The world is indeed governed by a set of impositions, one thing on another, and the continuing presence of poetry does not change this vital background assumption.

Beyond the loss of a multiple conception of causation, *Ge-stell*'s deposal of *poiēsis* suggests the more profound loss of a disclosive relationship with Being. Rojcewicz's conception of the relationship between Being and the human is diagrammatically clear: Being offers itself to humans when it unconceals itself – this is *alētheia* – and the human “appropriates” that offer by actively looking to what Being unconceals. Disclosive looking and unconcealing suggest a partnership between Being and humanity. But this partnership is not an equal one: “humans, in looking disclosively, are *not* autonomous. Disclosive looking is a following, not a leading”. Where the Greeks accepted the leading of Being at an ontological level, we moderns either deny the priority of Being or reject the relationship out of hand, insisting that the human is autonomous and ultimately powerful. This “anthropocentric view” or “obliviousness to Being” conceals the unconcealing of Being: it conceals *truth itself* – “does not allow the truth to manifest itself”.²⁰⁴

The foregoing is Rojcewicz's interpretation of the relationship between *Ge-stell* and *poiēsis*: modern technology annihilates (the) truth (of Being). The gods, once

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 148.

present, withdrew with the early Greek advent of the forms, and we are left with an offering of Being that at best can suggest to us how to recuperate this prior, better mode of understanding – this more complete truth. The salvation in modern technology lies with its indication of what it covers up.

In the passages under consideration, then, Rojcewicz seems to think that humanity once had access to a beautiful truth, but lost it and was thereby radically impoverished. He confirms this in his interpretation of freedom in the era of modern technology:

The antidote [to the false division between absolute control and absolute determinism]... the way to true human fulfillment and maturity, is to see a genuine alternative to imposition. We need to see authentic human freedom as a matter *neither* of domination *nor* of being dominated. We need to see our genuine freedom as *poiesis*, as free and yet subservient, as in service to something greater and yet not under domination. Our ideal needs to be *poiesis*.²⁰⁵

Certainly it is the case that humans are neither in complete control nor completely controlled – but is it true that *poiēsis* is the only path to recognizing and acting on this truth? And is it the case that *Heidegger* thinks that *poiēsis* is the ideal for which we should strive? Whatever the case, would an unconcealment of *poiēsis* necessitate a return to a Greek mode of being, or could it involve some sort of novel comportment to the world given a change in the way that the world is revealed?

Rojcewicz is unclear on these questions. In the passages presented so far, he seems to fall victim to a nostalgic, idealistic conception of the history of Being, but in other places he either emphasizes Heidegger's concern not for the past but for the uncertain future²⁰⁶ or writes in a fashion that suggests that the history of Being is more

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 153.

²⁰⁶ Interpreting Heidegger's statement that the task of philosophy is "to be in wonder at the approach of the earliest", Rojcewicz says that, "for Heidegger, philosophy is future-oriented and not a mere attempt to revive the past" (*The Gods and Technology*, 117).

than simply bifurcated.²⁰⁷ The nature of the relationship between *poiēsis*, *Ge-stell*, and the saving power, whatever it might be, is therefore unclear, even for Rojcewicz. My concern in pointing to this lack of clarity is to argue for a conception of this relationship that is adequately historical. My two contentions are that the history of Being cannot be understood in terms of a single line of division, and that the ontological does not precede the ontical as a straightforward condition of possibility. Rojcewicz himself can be interpreted in this fashion, but only by first pointing out the problem with his seeming assumption that a departure from *Ge-stell* necessitates a (re)turn to *poiēsis*. This is not the only possibility for the revealing of the world.

Rojcewicz's excellent interpretation of Heidegger's redefinition of essence makes this point about revealing clear. The interpretation is complicated, but can be put, relatively briefly, in the following way. To begin with, *Ge-stell* is not an essence as essences are traditionally conceived (e.g. as that which things have in common, or as a genus). Because the essence of modern technology is unfamiliar, it invites us to rethink what essence itself might be. This might help us to understand and live in the world in a non-impositional fashion. Heidegger re-conceives essence by first pointing to two words in which the German noun *Wesen* is found in a slightly unconventional fashion – to *das Hauswesen*, or “domestic affairs”, and to *das Staatswesen*, or “public affairs”. These terms do not indicate that which domestic and public affairs hold in common (for instance), but rather refer to “abiding”: *das Hauswesen* and *das Staatswesen* are places where the domestic and the public constantly abide, or where domestic or public activities are constantly carried on. Since they constantly carry on in these places, there

²⁰⁷ “An essence may change, if Being bestows itself differently, if Being has a history” (Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 167).

is a strong temporal sense to *Wesen*: it indicates “enduring”. The verb *wesen* is therefore in a sense identical to the verb *währen*. However, it is by no means the case that that which endures in the essence of a thing, or that which essences, remains the same; Heidegger is not advancing a Platonic conception of the essence of things as eternal. Enduring can instead be considered in terms of “bestowal”. There is, again, an etymological clue that leads Heidegger to this connection: *währen*, which means “to endure”, can be connected to *gewähren*, which means “to bestow”. As with the other *ge-* words discussed in this chapter, *Gewähren* – bestowal – can be thought of as the precondition for and gathering place of that which endures. Enduring is only possible by virtue of a prior bestowal. Moreover, this prior bestowal has a tremendously gentle character: *Gewähren* means “giving”, “letting”, “tendering”, or “proffering”. Bestowal is the giving, letting, tendering, or proffering of Being; it is what Being bestows to the world. The destining of Being, so reconceived as bestowal, is absolutely not a fate or an imposition, but a gift: *Ge-stell* is not something thrust upon humanity but something bestowed upon or given to humanity. It represents some sort of new possibility for understanding. And as with any gift, *Ge-stell* must be actively received by the recipient.²⁰⁸

The re-conception of essence, then, results in this: essence is an active bestowal of Being that gives the human the chance to actively receive an understanding of Being. Essence, as bestowal, bears with it a radical re-conception of freedom not as a freedom from imposition or as a freedom to impose, but as a freedom to accept the bestowal of Being. Finally, and most importantly for the question of historical ontology and the place

²⁰⁸ Rojcewicz, *The Gods and Technology*, 156-67.

of *poiēsis*, since Being changes, essences also change: Being bestows itself differently in different epochs, or when different modes of revealing hold sway. “Thus, the essence of technology, our understanding of things in general, both endures and changes on account of the history of Being”.²⁰⁹

In none of this re-conception of essence as bestowal does Rojcewicz suggest that Being will necessarily bestow itself again in the mode of *poiēsis*. Even if Being can be reconceived or re-appropriated as a letting, there is no reason why this letting needs to be understood in the specific terms of *poiēsis*, e.g. in terms of fourfold causation. In fact, since Being is historical – since Being changes – there should be no reason to assume that the *poiēsis* of the Greeks will be the way that Being could reveal itself to us, in an alternative to imposition, today. There may well be alternatives to the impositional framework bestowed by Being, and *poiēsis* may be one of them or may, taken in the most formal possible manner, include these alternatives within itself, but we need to be attentive to the possibility of an entirely novel bestowal of Being. Retaining the term *poiēsis* and connecting it so essentially to *alētheia*, itself taken as truth, might problematically confine the extent to which we can be so attentive. The history of Being should not be understood in the binaric and sequential terms of *poiēsis* and *Ge-stell*, or the approach-withdrawal-approach of the gods, but in a less prescriptive fashion.

The manner in which we should be attentive to the possibility of a novel bestowal of Being hinges on a second problem in Rojcewicz’s otherwise excellent interpretation: where Rojcewicz places ontology firmly in a place of priority over onticity, I would suggest that the ontical and the ontological mutually inflect one another, and that this

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 168.

mutual inflection is far from straightforward. This is where it becomes vital to talk not only about Being but about beings, which, from the perspective of someone who sits in front of a computer for long stretches at a time, means *virtual* beings. The digital character of the binary of boredom, ontical and inflected by the disposing dictates of *Ge-stell* though it may be, harbors implications for the manner in which Being today reveals itself, and therefore for the possibility of alternatives to this revealing. This particular permutation of the essence modern technology rests not only on our predisposal to dispose but also on the particular technologies that inform the manner of that disposal. Put differently: the essence of social media is not equivalent to the essence of modern technology, but the two certainly relate to one another. If this is the case, then a formal, theoretical comprehension of the relationship between Being and beings (i.e. in the terms of bestowal) may be less helpful than a concrete, experiential explication of the relationship between social media and the all-encompassing mood that it engenders, by which I mean that the latter approach might better point to alternatives to imposition and boredom. Thinking in these terms means shifting the focus from an abstract consideration of the way in which ontological constraints inform beings to a concrete consideration of the way in which social media informs Being. This is a project that might complement the suggestions made by Rojcewicz regarding the character of the saving power and the role of art that Heidegger discusses in the latter pages of “The Question concerning Technology”, but one that could just as easily contravene it.

So, rather than following Rojcewicz through his interpretations of art and detachment, I will take my approach for the second half of this dissertation from a line towards the end of Heidegger’s essay. Having argued that the saving power can be

discerned even within the essence of modern technology – having, in the terms outlined above, discovered that the imposition of modern technology is nevertheless a bestowal of Being, and that modern technology therefore gives the gift of a free relationship to modern technology itself – Heidegger notes that simply discerning the possible presence of a saving power is not enough:

Through this we are not yet saved. But we are thereupon summoned to hope in the growing light of the saving power. How can this happen? Here and now and in little things, that we may foster the saving power in its increase. This includes holding always before our eyes the extreme danger.²¹⁰

In little things: both danger and hope can be seen in and enacted through little things. It is by way of onticity, if not in whole then at least in substantial part, that ontology is understood and altered.²¹¹ The importance of technology and social media lies as much in practice as it does in theory.

The practical sites of social media that I examine in the second half of the dissertation are ontical realizations of ontology, understood as Being, but also as a *Ge-stell* inflected by boredom. But this is a complex, two way relationship: *Ge-stell* does not simply dictate the form of the disposable things of the world, and it is not unaffected by those things. The culture of boredom that I am identifying with the internet changes (the way that we understand or experience) the world, albeit indirectly. Understanding the isomorphism that exists between onticity and ontology therefore demands a much closer look at social media itself.

²¹⁰ Heidegger, “The Question concerning Technology,” 33.

²¹¹ Methodologically, this approach resembles that of Michel Foucault, who suggests that the flows of power can best be understood by looking not to the head, from which orders are supposed to emanate, but to the capillaries, where those orders find conscious and unconscious expression (“*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-1976*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003)).

3.3: Conclusion: The Ontological and Technological Aspects of Virtual Boredom

In this chapter I argued that virtual boredom and the essence of modern technology are linked principally in the way that they work together to render the world disposable. In doing so I fleshed out the ontological skeleton of virtual boredom that I built in the first two chapters. These chapters argued the following:

1. Boredom is an *attunement*, meaning that it is a mood or emotional state that circumscribes how we perceive, act in, or comport ourselves to the world. As an attunement, boredom should be considered in relatively wide terms:
 - a. Our attunement concerns the distracted movement from boring things to interesting ones. The attunement under consideration should therefore be characterized by *distraction*, which includes within it the play of boredom and interest.
 - b. Including the opposite terms of boredom and interest, distraction shares the *ontotheological* character of the metaphysics, meaning that it both finds and justifies a picture of the world. The ontotheological purpose of distraction is the establishment of an affective-metaphysical ground of interest in continually changing, interesting things, and the verification of the value of these things through a number of socio-technical systems exemplified by the internet.
 - c. As ontotheological, distraction is *historico-ontological*: it has the force of metaphysics but its character changes over time. Furthermore, distraction

not only establishes certainty but also undermines it, making it *ambiguous*. Since both metaphysical certainty and the ontotheological assumptions of any given epoch should be called into question in order to demonstrate the existence of alternative ways of being in the world, distraction should be considered not only in the terms of the generation of an unshakable ground but also in the opposite terms of uncertainty and shakiness.

2. Emblematic of distraction, the boredom of the internet is discernible in an interest in virtual things that occasionally takes on the guise of a boredom with those things. This boredom can be considered in terms of two fundamental *existential characteristics*:
 - a. The boredom of the internet is free of the anxieties of purposelessness that accompany the quotidian boredom that is bound to objects: it is *casual* and *inconspicuous*.
 - b. Likewise, this boredom is free from anxiety over the dragging of time: it is characterized by *time's standing still*. The boredom of the internet cuts us off from the past and the future and locks us into the present.
 - c. While the boredom of the internet engenders a distraction that focuses our attention on items of interest, it can also therefore engender a *consideration of our existential constitution* by pointing, in its casual inconspicuousness and arresting of time, to the existential and temporal origin of possibilities. It invites a consideration of the character of the world even while it distracts us.

3. Reinforced through a proliferating number of screens, the boredom of the internet spreads to the rest of the world as an unconscious and powerful attunement.

Because it acts as an affective ground for the attunement of distraction and because it spreads so thoroughly, this ontical boredom starts to take on an ontological character. This is to say that, in virtual boredom, boring things become a boring world, or *the ontical becomes the ontological*: the world as such is coded as interesting on the one hand or boring on the other. However, again to emphasize the ambiguous character of this boredom, this means that the world can also be revealed as such a coding: boredom both reveals and conceals Being.

To this ontological characterization focusing on attunement, existential constitution, and ontological effect I can now add a technological characterization according to which boredom is a mode of disclosive looking that gives rise to formal and affective consequences based on a binary logic that further entrenches the ontological effects discussed above:

1. Virtual boredom is less a characteristic of the things of the world than a perspective, pre-understanding, or *mode of looking* on the world. As a mode of looking, it discloses the things of the world in a particular way – i.e. as boring or as interesting. As a disclosive looking that is technological in character, virtual boredom sometimes shares a number of characteristics with modern technology, which should be kept in mind when considering its effects. This disclosive looking:
 - a. *challenges* the world to be interesting;
 - b. *imposes* on the world to present itself for our diversion;

- c. *ravishes* the world by demanding that it present itself immediately and completely and then immediately dissolve when we are done with it;
 - d. *disposes* the world to be usable at will on the basis of a pre-existing socio-technological order (i.e. the predictability of the internet).
2. The disclosive looking of virtual boredom yields two formal and two affective results:
- a. In terms of formal effects, the world is first rendered a collection of *disposables*, meaning that all things are in principle available for use and discarding. This suggests that all things exist only on a shaky footing: they lack a ground. Second, since the disclosive looking is so widespread, it encompasses everything under its rubric: it gives Being itself the character of an *all-encompassing imposition*, or an original collection of impositions.
 - b. In terms of affective results, first, since disposables exist on a shaky ground, they demand *securitization*. We aim to secure ourselves against premature disposal, or against the early onset of boredom. We do so through the controlling mechanisms of technology, particularly social media. Second, since disposables have no inherent value, they beg for *valorization*. We either lie to ourselves about their importance or collect as many of them as possible in order to safeguard ourselves through quantity rather than quality. Neither response is completely effective.
3. Lacking an effective response to virtual boredom's growing power, we find the underlying logic of the disclosive looking of virtual boredom applicable to all

things thanks to the *binary of boredom*. This takes the world as such to be, in principle, evaluable on a binary basis. The binary of boredom separates interest from boredom and subordinates the latter to the former, but it also demands the instantaneous *movement* between evaluable elements because it recognizes an inherent entropy in all things: less interested by the minute, the subject must move from one always already discardable link to another. Repeated, this movement engenders an alternation between extremes.

4. Unchecked, the binary of boredom poses two dangers analogous to those posed by the essence of modern technology:
 - a. First, we attain the *illusion of total control*, i.e. the illusion of controlling everything on the screen and in the world. However, we know that we do not actually control everything, and we engage in self-recrimination for turning into something as unimportant as the things that we browse.
 - b. Second, we ensure that nothing escapes *evaluation*. All things are evaluated on a binary basis because things are simply context- and relationship-free things.

So considered, virtual boredom is a complicated technological and ontological hybrid threatening a series of minor evaluations that give rise to major consequences. All the same, it is also a window onto the existential world of contemporary human life, since it illuminates the existential-temporal conditions of possibility of free human action and the bestowing relationship between Dasein and Being.

Heidegger's thinking always proceeds from something apparently correct to something true by way of the appearance of the correct or the veiling of the true; by

looking to points of breakage in common sense, his thinking reveals the complicated network of relationships between apparently simple things and the ways in which those relationships can change. In this dissertation I am concerned to interrogate the particular breakages apparent in the dominant logic of social media in order to understand the broadly phenomenological (technological, ontological, psychological) network of relationships between the terms of that logic and the ways that they can change. The particular breakages in the logic of social media that should be examined are, I contend, the moments of discord or uncertainty – the moments where the medium enters visibility and can be considered *as* a medium. These moments and the ever widening gyre of ontological disposability that they cast into relief can be most clearly discerned in the reactions to them – i.e. in the ways that we cast about for something that is other than disposable. We look for individuality or certainty in a world where those things are less and less relevant, both in the ontological terms according to which the subject and the object are less starkly separated and in the digital terms of distributed identity. The following chapters illustrate these affective-ontological responses to virtual boredom in order to deepen the foregoing theoretical analysis with a thoroughly practical focus and to prepare a conclusion regarding the dangers and hopes inherent in the little things of social media by drawing on particular reaction sites, or, in other words, to explain how the relationships between the terms of social media can change. In the fourth chapter, I demonstrate how the profile sculpting that takes place on Facebook illustrates the desire for a clear subjectivity that can act as the ground for a comprehensible worldview. In the fifth chapter, I discuss a less subject-centred response, looking to the ambiguous ground provided by the pseudonymity of Reddit in order to argue that the reaction to boredom

retains its force even in the comparative absence of subjectivity. In the sixth chapter, I extend this argument to a site where subjectivity, and hence the possibility for a subject-centred reaction to the disposability wrought by virtual boredom, is arguably entirely absent, exploring the possibility that a move away from subjectivity might also constitute a move away from the dual essence of technology and virtual boredom.

Chapter Four: A Life Lived on Automatic

Much of the academic literature written about Facebook concerns privacy.²¹²

There is good cause for this: Facebook is emphatically, transparently anti-private. In the technology that it uses (like facial recognition software),²¹³ the corporation's mission statement ("to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected"),²¹⁴ and Mark Zuckerberg's thoroughly consistent public comments about the singular and transparent character of identity ("You have only one identity"),²¹⁵ Facebook makes its anti-private stance clear: at best, privacy is a relic of a bygone era; at worst, it is an impediment to the improvement of the world. Facebook has taken an ideological stand against the issue.

The latter claim might at first sound strange. Surely Facebook stands against privacy for economic reasons. This is the first explanation that is usually given²¹⁶ for Facebook's stance on things like the correspondence of usernames to real names or the control that users have over their privacy settings, and it makes a lot of sense: if

²¹² A search of danah boyd's online bibliography of research on social network sites turns up 113 references to "Facebook". Of these, 22 concern privacy. The closest followers concern library science and the potential educational uses of Facebook (13), personality, relationships, and self-presentation (13), and social capital (11), with various other categories trailing behind (danah boyd, "Bibliography of Research on Social Network Sites," *danah.org*, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://www.danah.org/researchBibs/sns.php>). This does not constitute an exhaustive literature review, of course, but does illustrate internet scholars' preoccupation with privacy.

²¹³ Facebook uses the software to provide "tag suggestions" for photos. The service is currently unavailable to Canadian users (Anita Elash, "Facebook Facial-Recognition Feature Won't Be Available to Canadians," *The Globe and Mail*, July 27, 2011, accessed April 30, 2012, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/facebook-facial-recognition-feature-wont-be-available-to-canadians/article2110892/>).

²¹⁴ Facebook, "About," accessed April 30, 2012, <http://www.facebook.com/facebook/info>.

²¹⁵ David Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect: The Inside Story of the Company That Is Connecting the World* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 199.

²¹⁶ See, for instance, Christian Fuchs, "The Political Economy of Privacy on Facebook," *Television and New Media* 13.2 (2012): 139-159.

Facebook has accurate user information, it will be able to sell that information to advertisers.²¹⁷ This model, which Facebook already follows, could be amplified through an advertising system that could compete with Google's AdSense. This is one of the monetization possibilities that have helped the company accrue so much value: its initial public offering, which is expected in mid-May, 2012, has been valued at over \$100 billion, based on private market trading.²¹⁸

But Zuckerberg has never been very interested in monetizing his company, or in money at all.²¹⁹ He has rejected offers to sell in the past, and has consistently placed little emphasis on monetization schemes, preferring to devote Facebook's resources to the development of its design and the applications that have helped the company grow to

²¹⁷ Although it is Facebook that collects this information, this information does not remain only with Facebook. Drawing on Helen Nissenbaum (*Privacy in Context: Technology, Policy, and the Integrity of Social Life* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009)) and the increasingly large surveillance studies literature (see, for instance, the essays collected in Kirstie Ball, Kevin Haggerty, and David Lyon, eds., *Routledge Handbook of Surveillance Studies* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012)), Daniel Trottier notes that users share information *laterally* with their friends, *institutionally* with corporate and government bodies that are invested in monitoring citizens and consumers, and *in the aggregate* with businesses engaged in data mining – and that these three “diagrams” of information sharing reinforce one another, leading to the increasing dissemination of new, and formerly private, information (“Mutual Augmentation of Surveillance Practices on Social Media” (PhD diss., Queen's University, 2010), 14-15; see also Daniel Trottier, *Social Media as Surveillance: Rethinking Visibility in a Converging World* (Aldershot, England: Ashgate, 2012)). Facebook is undeniably being used as a tool for surveillance, but I deliberately avoid taking up this literature here.

²¹⁸ Henry Blodget, “Facebook's Value Blows through \$100 Billion in Last Trade before IPO,” *Business Insider*, March 31, 2012, accessed April 12, 2012, http://articles.businessinsider.com/2012-03-31/tech/31264720_1_facebook-s-worth-sharespost-facebook-s-ceo-mark-zuckerberg.

²¹⁹ Detractors claim that Zuckerberg's personal disinterest in money has become a problem, manifesting in declining revenues for its future investors. See, for instance, Nicholas Carlson, “Maybe Mark Zuckerberg Doesn't Like Money Enough to Run a \$100 Billion Company,” *SFGate*, April 25, 2012, accessed April 30, 2012, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/g/a/2012/04/25/businessinsidermaybe-mark-zuckerber.DTL>. Carlson quotes former employee Ezra Callahan on the question of Zuckerberg's disinterest in money, who notes that Zuckerberg cares about nothing but work – that he lived in the same “small, crappy apartment” for years, only moving out “when Facebook's security team and advisers more or less forced him”.

over 900 million users – a number that is likely to top one billion by August, 2012.²²⁰

And he himself makes his putative disinterest in profit for profit's sake explicit:

The question I ask myself like almost every day is, 'Am I doing the most important thing I could be doing?' Because if not, we've built this company to a good enough point that I don't have to be doing this, or anything else. That's the argument a lot of people have given me for why we should have sold the company in the past. Then we could just go hang out. So then you face this question of what's important to you. Unless I feel like I'm working on *the most* important problem that I can help with, then I'm not going to feel good about how I'm spending my time.²²¹

So what *is* Zuckerberg's "problem"? What does he want Facebook to achieve?

Answering this question will reveal something about the kind of individual that Facebook is helping to create – what I will contend is an important modification to our usual understanding of the liberal, economic subject involving "openness" and "connection". It will also illustrate that a "technological" view of the world enables the emergence of this individual and our massive collective adoption of social media, and that this view of the world inclines the open and connected individual towards convenience.

To demonstrate the significance of this inclination, I move from a discussion of Facebook's Mission to the corporate culture and ideology that informs it in the first section of the chapter, showing that Zuckerberg's advocacy of openness and connection rests on a much wider set of assumptions about the informational character of the world. In the second section, I answer the question of whether Facebook successfully institutes an open and connected individual by examining the way that services like News Feed and Timeline function, arguing that Facebook's creation of a browseable archive should be understood in terms of convenience. I generalize this argument in the brief third section

²²⁰ Todd Wasserman, "Facebook Now Has 901 Million Users," *Mashable*, April 23, 2012, accessed April 30, 2012, <http://mashable.com/2012/04/23/facebook-now-has-901-million-users/>.

²²¹ David Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect*, 330.

of the chapter, suggesting that the increasing sway of Facebook demands a modification to the concept of *Ge-stell* that emphasizes convenience over use or control. In doing so, I broaden my analysis beyond Facebook, noting that my conclusions can be applied to the mediated world more generally.

4.1: Social Missionaries

Zuckerberg is perfectly candid about his company's goals; from the beginning, he has spoken publicly about the importance of connecting the world. He recently issued a relatively lengthy explanation of these goals, though, and it makes clear the details of the company's mission, as well as its scope, basis, and method.²²²

The Securities and Exchange Commission Filing Letter

Facebook, Zuckerberg writes, "was not originally created to be a company. It was built to accomplish a social mission – to make the world more open and connected".²²³ This "Mission" should be understood in terms other than those of the normal corporate mission statement – something created to justify, post facto, an enterprise designed to create profit. Every account of Facebook's history suggests that Facebook's mission dates back to its founding, well before the company had introduced advertisements or

²²² Facebook, "Letter from Mark Zuckerberg," Form S-1 Registration Statement under the Securities Act of 1933 (Washington, DC: United States Securities and Exchange Commission), February 1, 2012, accessed April 28, 2012, http://sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1326801/000119312512034517/d287954ds1.htm#toc287954_10, 67-70.

²²³ Facebook, "Letter from Mark Zuckerberg," 67.

third party applications. Facebook's mission should be understood in the terms of *missionary* work: Zuckerberg wants to change the world.

This desire is evident in the Mission's stated scope: "[t]here is a huge need... to get everyone in the world connected". The company's 900 million users, who use the service in over 70 languages, are a good start, but Zuckerberg hopes that the company will eventually bring everyone into the fold. He admits that this will be a challenge – it is an "unprecedented" undertaking – but he claims that it is "the most important problem we can focus on".²²⁴ Disconnection is a *problem*, and this problem implies a *lack*: we are incompletely connected today, but tomorrow might bring a perfectly connected world.

The people of the world, then, are metaphysical units that can and should be connected. Zuckerberg's letter implies this particular understanding of the world at times, but also states it explicitly: "[p]ersonal relationships are the fundamental unit of our society".²²⁵ Connections are the groundwork of our social systems, and possibly of our basic ways of understanding the world as well. These connections, however, are not the most elemental unit, since they require two or more profiles or pages that can be connected. *Relata* precede relations; nodes precede edges; atoms precede molecules. Connections are formed when two individuals come into contact with one another. As such, they do not constitute the "fundamental" unit of our society; rather, it is the individual who fills this role. That said, this individual must be *open* to the possibility of connecting with another individual, and such openness requires accurate, *transparent* self representations. Users on Facebook should not lie. For Zuckerberg, then, it is transparent, open, and connected individuals who ground the world.

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

Unfortunately, people do not “naturally” disclose themselves to the world – or, at least, they have not so disclosed themselves in recent memory. People tend to guard their privacy. This, Zuckerberg implies, is a learned behaviour, but one that can be unlearned. Connections will, in and of themselves, change norms around privacy: “[b]y helping people form these connections, we hope to rewire the way people spread and consume information”; “our goal is to help this rewiring accelerate”.²²⁶ Here, Zuckerberg employs a neural metaphor, suggesting that the repetition of particular behaviours will fundamentally alter the way that people think – and that people will be happy about this change.²²⁷ The repetitive use of Facebook should therefore lead to a significant change in its users’ consciousness. The company therefore has a responsibility to direct these changes in a socially responsible fashion.

Thankfully, Zuckerberg is convinced that the connections that Facebook is fostering, and the behaviours that it is thereby inculcating, are improving the world:

We often talk about inventions like the printing press and the television – by simply making communication more efficient, they led to a complete transformation of many important parts of society. They gave more people a voice. They encouraged progress. They changed the way society was organized. They brought us closer together.²²⁸

The implication is clear: Facebook will do the same. Connecting individuals to one another over the internet is a radical leap forward, and it is Facebook’s responsibility to manage that leap.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Zuckerberg understands that his “vision of an open society and open world” will only come to pass if people elect that path for themselves. They cannot be forced into it; they must come to want the same things that Zuckerberg wants: he “understands that the way to get there is to give people granular control and comfort” (Sheryl Sandberg, the site’s chief operating officer, quoted in Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect*, 208-9).

²²⁸ Facebook, “Letter from Mark Zuckerberg,” 67.

Zuckerberg is a technological determinist of sorts – one who thinks that technology is improving the world by giving individuals the ability to share information and authentically connect to one another. As the co-founder and CEO of the most popular and arguably most influential website in the world, he intends to expedite this process. His ideological faith in a technologically connected form of individualism informs his actions – and, given Facebook’s continually increasing sway in the world of social media, ours as well.

But where does Zuckerberg’s ideology come from? What elements make it up, and how do they manifest on Facebook? Zuckerberg’s comments alone do not fully illustrate the ideology at work in the website. Facebook’s corporate culture embraces and extends Zuckerberg’s view of the world. By examining this corporate culture in more detail, I will show that we can trace this worldview – a modified version of the “Californian Ideology” – back to the cybernetics of the 1940s.

Corporate Culture: Sean Parker

Sean Parker was Facebook’s first president. Parker has been described as “a human accelerant, an idea catalyst who, when combined with the right people, has fuelled some of the most disruptive companies of the last two decades”.²²⁹ Parker has always been an extraordinarily energetic man capable of singular focus: when he invests himself in a problem, he devotes all of his energies to solving it. When he became involved with Facebook, he identified identity as a problem to be solved: “he was looking to have

²²⁹ Steven Bertoni, “Sean Parker: Agent of Disruption,” *Forbes*, August 21, 2011, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/stevenbertoni/2011/09/21/sean-parker-agent-of-disruption/>.

identity in a world [where] you could be totally anonymous and create fake avatars”; he saw Facebook as “a way to guarantee that there’s identity on the internet”.²³⁰

Parker thus resembles Zuckerberg with respect to his interest in “solving” the “problem” of identity.²³¹ His other activities add to the picture. As a teenager, Parker co-founded Napster, a program that allowed peers to freely share music files, with Shawn Fanning. The program quickly became incredibly popular, kicking off the digital music revolution. Years later, he invested heavily in Spotify, a European service now integrated with Facebook that allows its users to stream music for a small fee. These two endeavours demonstrate that Parker is a believer in individualism and the market. With Napster, Parker saw an opportunity to minimize the influence of the music industry on the distribution of music. Napster permitted users to share files regardless of location, language, or class; it made it possible for individuals to understand and express themselves in musical terms relatively uncontaminated by the various biases of the music industry. Napster was so successful in minimizing the apparent role of industry and establishing digital file sharing as a norm that Parker could confidently invest in a for profit music service that would further the full expression of individualism, and would do so without the problem of intellectual property violations.

Two more projects – Causes and Votizen – add another element to Parker’s characteristics: he has faith in the power of collectives. Causes used to be a Facebook

²³⁰ Ibid, video.

²³¹ Edward Andrew, referring to George Grant, argues that this problem-solving attitude stems from modern technology, understood in Heidegger’s sense: “[o]ur technological world imposes an engineering outlook on us all; that is, we conceive our experience in terms of problems, adopt a one-dimensional perspective on the world, and reduce the world of work to problems of productivity, measured in profits” (“George Grant on the Political Economy of Technology,” *Bulletin of Science, Technology, and Society* 23.6 (2003): 483). Andrew reduces the problem-solving attitude to the pursuit of profit, but Zuckerberg’s and Parker’s pursuits suggest that profit is not their principal motivator. There is something appealing about problem-solving that cannot be reduced to productivity, efficiency, or capital.

app – one of the very first – but it has since turned into its own separate but still integrated company. Parker saw the potential for philanthropic mobilization that the new social media service offered: he could connect registered non-profit organizations with Facebook’s users, and thereby “empower” anyone with ideas or passion “to change the world”.²³² Votizen operates on a similar premise: people can impact the world – the political world – by learning about issues and coordinating their actions online. Causes and Votizen demonstrate that Parker has faith not just in the individual and the market, but the collective as well: social media can be used to change the world. Parker is sceptical about the power of normal (middle class) individuals to effect political or philanthropic change on their own – he says he is “not a huge believer in direct democracy”²³³ – but he thinks that collective mobilization can produce change. This is not least because the technological, social media-based mobilization of individuals has the power to remove extraneous influences from politics (for instance): digital pressure groups bring numbers rather than dollars to bear on politics, which Parker sees as a more authentic form of political engagement.

Parker thus believes in individuals, but also in collectives; in markets, but also in the deliberate exclusion of money. These appear to be contradictory items of faith, but technology reconciles them: it is the power of social media that brings together capitalism and collectivism. In this view, social media tends towards openness and connectedness in and of itself; it is a substantive technology. Additionally, it seems that the medium will inevitably develop. There is a double technological determinism at work here.

²³² Causes, “About Causes,” accessed May 2, 2012, <http://www.causes.com/about>.

²³³ Quoted in Tom Simonite, “Five Interesting Things Sean Parker Said Yesterday,” *Technology Review*, November 16, 2011, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://www.technologyreview.com/blog/editors/27347/>.

Capitalism, collectivism, and technological determinism: these three ideologies come together to form the “Californian Ideology”. Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron characterize it as “an anti-statist gospel of hi-tech libertarianism: a bizarre mish-mash of hippie anarchism and economic liberalism beefed up with lots of technological determinism”, and claim that the Californian Ideology describes Silicon Valley as a whole.²³⁴ Many other writers have linked the capitalist and libertarian aspects of the Californian Ideology to the internet more specifically,²³⁵ but Kate Raynes-Goldie connects the Californian Ideology as a whole to Facebook, demonstrating in her (as yet unpublished) dissertation the ways in which Facebook can be thought of in a capitalist, collectivist, and technological determinist fashion.²³⁶ Additionally, however, Raynes-Goldie produces a genealogy that shows how the Californian Ideology itself comes out of the cybernetics movement, and shares additional characteristics with it. This origin is significant because it explains some of Zuckerberg’s missionary zeal:

²³⁴ Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, “The Californian Ideology,” *Science as Culture* 26 (1995-96): 44-72.

²³⁵ The capitalist, libertarian tenor of the internet was an issue of considerable discussion around the turn of the century: see, for instance, Nick Dyer-Witheford, *Cyber-Marx: Cycles and Circuits of Struggle in High-Technology Capitalism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Andrew Herman and John Sloop, “Red Alert! Rhetorics of the World Wide Web and Friction Free Capitalism,” in Andrew Herman and Thomas Swiss, eds., *Cultural Theory and the World Wide Web*, 77-98 (London: Routledge, 2000); Tim Jordan, *Cyberpower: The Culture and Politics of Cyberspace and the Internet* (London: Routledge, 1999); Kevin Robins and Frank Webster, *Times of the Technoculture: From the Information Society to the Virtual Life* (London: Routledge, 1999); and Tiziana Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,” *Social Text* 18.2 (2000): 33-58. Other authors have taken up the subject more recently; among these, Christian Fuchs is probably the most prolific: see, for instance, “Cognitive Capitalism or Informational Capitalism? The Role of Class in the Information Economy,” in *Cognitive Capitalism, Education and Digital Labor*, eds. Michael Peters and Ergin Bulut (New York: Peter Lang, 2011): 75-119; “The Contemporary World Wide Web: Social Medium or New Space of Accumulation?” in *The Political Economies of Media: The Transformation of the Global Media Industries*, eds. Dwayne Winseck and Dal Yong Jin (London: Bloomsbury, 2011): 201-220; or “Labor in Informational Capitalism and on the Internet,” *The Information Society* 26.3 (2010): 179-196.

²³⁶ For a brief summary of the relevant main claims of her dissertation, see Kate Raynes-Goldie, “The Philosophy of Facebook (or, the Real Reason Facebook Doesn’t Care about Privacy),” k4t3.org, December 2, 2010, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://www.k4t3.org/2010/12/02/the-philosophy-of-facebook/>.

This evolution and merging of philosophies and ideas gave us The Californian Ideology in the 1990s, which spawned Web 2.0 in the mid 2000s. But the most important aspect for our discussion of privacy, which draws on [Norbert] Wiener's cybernetics, is the notion that most world problems are problems of inefficient, closed communication, disorder or poor information sharing. Computers, as systems, can be seen as sources of 'moral good' as they can solve these problems (see [Wiener's] "The Human Use of Human Beings" for more on this). If the entire universe is code (a favourite notion of [*Wired* magazine editor] Kevin Kelly), then the conversion or merging of the analog with the digital would turn the physical world into a manageable system, one that can be indexed, managed, sorted and redistributed (and of course aggregated and datamined as well), thus making the world ordered, open, efficient and transparent. In other words, better. Sound familiar?²³⁷

Zuckerberg's ideas, and therefore the direction of the company, can be traced back to this conception of the world as something informational or computational, and therefore as something manipulable. Raynes-Goldie, following Jaron Lanier, terms this conception of the world "cybernetic totalism", thereby modifying Barbrook and Cameron's understanding of the Californian Ideology.²³⁸

Corporate Culture: Peter Thiel

The cybernetic vision of a "radically transparent" world²³⁹ can be seen with frightening clarity in Peter Thiel's projects, writing, and philanthropy. Thiel is a peerless investor – he made his first \$60 million from a \$240,000 investment in PayPal²⁴⁰ – and a

²³⁷ Ibid.

²³⁸ Jaron Lanier, "One Half a Manifesto," *Edge*, November 11, 2000, accessed June 17, 2012, http://www.edge.org/3rd_culture/lanier/lanier_index.html. For a video essay on the consequences of the Californian Ideology's view of the world as an informational system, see "Love and Power," *All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace*, directed by Adam Curtis (BBC Two, May 23, 2011), Television.

²³⁹ Raynes-Goldie argues that the Californian Ideology finds expression on Facebook as a "radically transparent sociality".

²⁴⁰ Alistair Thomas, "Peter Thiel: From Frankfurt to the World of Global Markets," *aTrader*, December 28, 2011, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://www.atrader.com/manager-profile/11-peter-thiel-frankfurt-world-global-markets>.

“package of contradictions”: “he is a gay, Christian, entrepreneur, venture capitalist, libertarian, lawyer”.²⁴¹ He was Facebook’s first angel investor and a “mentor” to Zuckerberg,²⁴² and he has served on the board of directors since its early years. His “contradictory” ideas have helped shape the direction of the company.

These ideas find clear expression in Thiel’s projects. The Thiel Foundation, which “defends and promotes freedom in all its dimensions: political, personal, and economic”,²⁴³ supports a number of organizations that add a few more “isms” to the Californian Ideology. The Thiel Foundation supports Aubrey de Grey, for instance, a gerontologist with the Methuselah Foundation known for his claims that death is simply a disease and that the first human who will live to 1000 years of age has already been born.²⁴⁴ Thiel believes that he will use technology to stave off, or even entirely prevent, death.²⁴⁵ Thiel is also on the board of directors for the Singularity Institute, which coordinates efforts to bring about the “technological singularity” – that point in time when computers will become “smarter” than human beings, and will begin to produce themselves. (Ray Kurzweil: “Does god exist? Well, I would say not yet.”)²⁴⁶ Finally, Thiel has invested \$500,000 in the Seasteading Institute, an organization run by Milton Friedman’s grandson devoted to establishing libertarian communities in the ocean. These projects demonstrate Thiel’s adherence to transhumanism or extropianism, which hold

²⁴¹ WhoOwnsFacebook, accessed May 2, 2012, www.whoownsfacebook.com.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ The Thiel Foundation, “About the Foundation,” accessed May 2, 2012, <http://www.thielfoundation.org/index.php>.

²⁴⁴ Aubrey de Grey, “Aubrey de Grey Says We Can Avoid Aging,” TED Talks, October, 2006, accessed May 2, 2012, http://www.ted.com/talks/aubrey_de_grey_says_we_can_avoid_aging.html.

²⁴⁵ While at PayPal, Thiel “proposed making cryogenic storage an employee perk” (Jacob Weisberg, “Turn On, Start Up, Drop Out,” *Slate*, October 16, 2010, accessed May 2, 2012, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2010/10/turn_on_start_up_drop_out.html).

²⁴⁶ *Transcendent Man*, DVD, directed by Robert Barry Ptolemy (2009; USA: Ptolemaic Productions, 2011).

that all parts of the human can be improved and its life extended; to singulatarianism, which holds that computers will bring about a technological utopia; and to libertarianism, which values individual liberty above all else.

Again, it is technology that unites these beliefs. Thiel's writing demonstrates this. When he was a student at Stanford, he writes, he attempted to bring about change through writing and political motivation, but he found it slow and ultimately ineffective – too much effort for far too little reward. He therefore decided that advancing human freedom could not be achieved using democratic or educational means.²⁴⁷ Since political methods would not produce radical change then and will not now, libertarians must “find an escape from politics in all its forms – from the totalitarian and fundamentalist catastrophes to the unthinking demos that guides so-called ‘social democracy’”. The tool for achieving this escape is technology – a pure, unfettered technology guided by the successful libertarian. We “are in a deadly race between politics and technology”, Thiel writes, and we must use technology to win the race.²⁴⁸

This, then, explains Thiel's investment in digital technologies like PayPal and Facebook: they are an *anti-political means* by which “freedom” can be achieved. Technology will help us to escape our earthly limitations – to escape the body by going online, to escape governments by going to the oceans, to escape death by curing the disease that it surely must be, and, one day, to escape the earth itself by flying into space.

²⁴⁷ “I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible”, and “the broader education of the body politic has become a fool's errand” (Peter Thiel, “On the Education of a Libertarian,” *Cato Unbound*, April 13, 2009, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://www.cato-unbound.org/2009/04/13/peter-thiel/the-education-of-a-libertarian/>).

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.* The use of the escape metaphor is entirely appropriate: Thiel also suggests that libertarians might find a happy future living in outer space.

As a multi-millionaire, Thiel can bypass the need for ineffectual politics and support these kinds of endeavours, particularly those related to the internet, directly.

The Californian Ideology

Taken together, the ideas and activities of Zuckerberg, Parker, and Thiel paint a relatively complete picture of the Californian Ideology. As Raynes-Goldie argues in her dissertation, the Ideology is comprised of *capitalism*, *communalism*, and *technological determinism*, but also of *transhumanism*, *singultarianism*, *libertarianism*, and *cybernetic totalism*. The Californian Ideology is based on a metaphysical assumption about the world – i.e., that it is based on *individuals* who are “connected” with one another as two aggregates of sharable information. These connections are, in their pure state, free of political or ethical aspects or compulsions: the fact that I am connected to you (or to a political entity, or to a company, or to any other aggregation of information with which a user can form a connection)²⁴⁹ does not mean that I need to do anything. However, if I know enough *about* you, then I may choose to interact. We may build things together. Hence Facebook’s Mission: make the world open and connected, and we will make it better.²⁵⁰

²⁴⁹ Sandberg notes this functional equivalence made possible by the informational character of the world, claiming that “[p]eople on Facebook connect to businesses just as they connect to other people: I take my kids to the Woodside Bakery for pancakes; I track my runs with Nike FuelBand; I shop at J. Crew” (jasdhaliwal, “Facebook’s Roadshow Video,” YouTube, May 3, 2012, accessed May 4, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btQIHSApV_0&feature=player_embedded#!).

²⁵⁰ As Zuckerberg puts it: “People sharing more – even if just with their close friends or families – creates a more open culture and leads to a better understanding of the lives and perspectives of others” (Facebook, “Letter from Mark Zuckerberg,” 67).

At best, Facebook's Mission is naïve. At worst, it is helping to create a transnational, colonial, capitalist subject who is alienated from the product of his or her production/consumption (sometimes referred to as "prosumption"),²⁵¹ disillusioned with his or her self representation, and disconnected from his or her friends – to point to just a few potential problems.

The first of these problems is that transnational capitalism creates and conditions Facebook's subject: he or she becomes an economic free agent who can be disconnected from his or her locale because of a prior, overriding connection to a globalist culture and economy. This subject is disassociated from his or her immediate community, culture, political system, and nation, and is instead connected to a geographically disparate community of colleagues, networkers, and university students who form a new transnational upper middle class. The ideas of this class, disseminated through Facebook and other social network sites, threaten to take on a hegemonic character. People like Zuckerberg might believe in the cosmopolitan citizen and a true global community, but they also believe in a transnational collection of individuals who come together on the basis of common interests and projects, without reference to local community. Both situations mean the potential neglect of the local, understood in this vision as those individuals with whom you happen to merely share geographic space.

Second, and building on the above, Facebook's subject is a proletarian who has no control over the means of production, but who labours under the illusion that he or she does control his or her self production as "prosumer". Internet wisdom holds that

²⁵¹ The words "prosumer" and "produser" are used to denote the supposedly co-creative role that internet users have in creating content. José van Dijck argues that this co-creative role is much smaller than internet enthusiasts like to claim ("Users Like You? Theorizing Agency in User-Generated Content," *Media, Culture, and Society* 31.1 (2009): 41-58).

websites that do not charge a fee are selling *you*, its user, to advertisers, but this wisdom does not seem to change users' behaviour on sites like Facebook: users continue to view ads tailored to them, even going so far as to give you the privilege of hiding ads they do not like – thereby ensuring that Facebook sells a more perfect product to its advertisers. Additionally, Facebook's subject has been well and truly alienated: he or she produces himself or herself, consciously labouring to create a compelling profile. The user invests himself or herself in the product, i.e. the profile, but the profile is owned by others, insofar as the information contained therein is aggregated and sold to advertisers. New forms of immaterial labour like "user-generated content" and "prosumption" can be disempowering.

To these problems of political economy I could add two others concerning two disconnects, the first between the intended representation of the self and the lived experience of selfhood, which does not "live up" to the representation, and the second between friends with whom one hopes to feel an actual connection. Call the first a sort of hypocrisy: self representations on Facebook are supposed to be both accurate and ideal, but managing to make the two meet up is difficult. This disconnect plays out in a number of different ways – in Facebook's ostensible drive towards openness, which is belied by its structural closure (there are many things that one may not depict on Facebook);²⁵² in the over-representation of narcissists on the site, which encourages narcissistic mimesis

²⁵² Facebook hires low paid contractors to trawl Facebook searching for objectionable content to be censored. Some of the content would be censored on just about any website – "porn, gore, racism, cyberbullying, and so on" – but other content marks Facebook as a site that adheres to its own idiosyncratic, culturally specific guidelines. A contractor from Morocco leaked a document outlining these guidelines in early 2012, and *Gawker* made it public, noting that the document, which forbids pictures of things like breastfeeding, sexual fetishes, and images of drunk and unconscious people, "is essentially a map of Facebook's moral terrain" (Adrian Chen, "Inside Facebook's Outsourced Anti-Porn and Gore Brigade, Where 'Camel Toes' Are More Offensive than 'Crushed Heads,'" *Gawker*, February 16, 2012, accessed April 27, 2012, <http://gawker.com/5885714/>).

in the self-representation of others;²⁵³ or in Zuckerberg's "interest" in "eliminating desire".²⁵⁴ Call the second disconnect – that between oneself and one's friends – "friendship". When I look at my friends' updates on News Feed, I feel the sensation of connection, or of knowing what is happening in their lives. I experience the temporary satisfaction of having connected with them. I may amplify this satisfaction by commenting on something, or sending them a message. This is in some ways no different from communicating with a friend over email, Skype, or post, but it differs in other ways. Zadie Smith explains this difference eloquently:

The last defense of every Facebook addict is: *but it helps me keep in contact with people who are far away!* Well, e-mail and Skype do that, too, and they have the added advantage of not forcing you to interface with the mind of Mark Zuckerberg – but, well, you know. We all know. If we *really* wanted to write to these faraway people, or see them, we would. What we actually want to do is the bare minimum, just like any nineteen-year-old college boy who'd rather be doing something else, or nothing.²⁵⁵

The desire to "connect" is not the same as the desire to establish and maintain a friendship. Or, to paraphrase Aristotle: on Facebook, my friends, there is no friend.

²⁵³ According to a psychological study conducted in 2011, heavy Facebook users – those who regularly post pictures and updates, and who have more friends than the average – were more likely to engage in the "self-promoting behaviors" characteristic of narcissism (Christopher J. Carpenter, "Narcissism on Facebook: Self-Promotional and Anti-Social Behavior," *Personality and Individual Differences* 52 (2012): 482-86). According to Carpenter (Ibid, 482), other studies have found similar correlations between narcissism and the frequency with which a user accesses Facebook (L. E. Buffardi and W. K. Campbell, "Narcissism and Social Networking Websites," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 34 (2008): 1303-14; S. Mehdizadeh, "Self-Presentation 2.0: Narcissism and Self-Esteem on Facebook," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 13 (2010): 357-364; E. Y. L. Ong et al., "Narcissism, Extraversion, and Adolescents' Self-Presentation on Facebook," *Personality and Individual Differences* 50 (2011): 180-85), or between narcissism and the number of friends that a user has (S. M. Bergman et al., "Millennials, Narcissism, and Social Networking: What Narcissists Do on Social Network Sites and Why," *Personality and Individual Differences* 50.5 (2011): 706-11).

²⁵⁴ Since at least 2010, Zuckerberg has listed "Eliminating Desire" among his interests (Jose Antonio Vargas, "The Face of Facebook: Mark Zuckerberg Opens Up," *The New Yorker*, September 20, 2010, accessed April 27, 2012, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/09/20/100920fa_fact_vargas). As of April 2012, this appears alongside "Making Things", "Minimalism", "Openness", and "Information Flow".

²⁵⁵ Zadie Smith, "Generation Why?" *The New York Review of Books*, November 25, 2010, accessed April 27, 2012 <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/nov/25/generation-why/?pagination=false>.

There are, then, a number of possible problems with the Californian Ideology and Facebook's drive to openness and connection, and I might use the rest of this chapter to explore a class based criticism, or one concerned with alienation, or one that highlights narcissistic self representations and all too temporary connections with others. I might also raise other criticisms of Facebook, like its wilful violations of privacy or the colonial character of its imperial ambitions. Any of these criticisms would highlight an important problem with the service, and might suggest policy solutions, activism, or tactical approaches that might destabilize the site. In addition to these criticisms, I want to briefly note a more structural problem that encompasses them, namely the speed with which changes are made to and on Facebook and the subjectivation that is the result of that speed.

Zuckerberg, Parker, and Thiel all buy into some or all of the Californian Ideology, regardless of the problems outlined above. Additionally, however, all three are obsessed with *results* and *speed*. Outcomes are their watchword. Thiel complains about the little that he accomplished using discourse while a student at Stanford;²⁵⁶ Parker bounces from one paradigm-shifting project to another at a breakneck pace, and has been fired three times as a consequence;²⁵⁷ and Zuckerberg's "Hacker Way" suggests that it is far better to get something done and out into the world than to make sure that it's right.²⁵⁸ Everything can be fixed later. This collective bent towards speed might not be quite so alarming if it were limited to the business world, but it is not: all three Facebook

²⁵⁶ Thiel "started a student newspaper to challenge the prevailing campus orthodoxies" and "scored some limited victories", but "did not achieve all that much for all the effort expended. Much of it felt like trench warfare on the Western Front in World War I; there was a lot of carnage, but we did not move the center of the debate" (Thiel, "On the Education of a Libertarian").

²⁵⁷ Parker was fired from Napster, Plaxo, and Facebook.

²⁵⁸ Facebook, "Letter from Mark Zuckerberg," 69.

luminaries care about *changing the world*.²⁵⁹ They are not interested in talking about it; they just want it done. This is eminently problematic, both for the reasons listed above concerning the other criticisms of Facebook and because this ambition rests on a disdain for the world as it currently exists. The world presents problems to be fixed.

All of these criticisms beg the question: is Facebook actually fulfilling its Mission? Is it changing the world? Is it in fact making people more open and connected? If it is not, then these criticisms may be irrelevant.

Facebook's own numbers certainly suggest that the site is accomplishing its Mission. To argue that the site is indeed establishing "connections", I could point to Facebook's successful spread over the globe (to its 900 million users living in over 200 countries),²⁶⁰ or to the high average frequency of use,²⁶¹ or to the high average number of friends – 190.²⁶² Chris Cox, Vice President, Products, sums up these numbers in the "Road Show" video Facebook released in advance of its May, 2012 initial public offering:

There are over 125 billion friendships on Facebook. There are over 300 million photos uploaded every single day. There's two billion likes a day, and comments

²⁵⁹ Zuckerberg, Parker, and Thiel are not alone in Facebook's inner circle in terms of their desire to change the world. Justin Rosenstein, the current business partner of Facebook co-founder Dustin Moskovitz, thinks of his work "as an act of service, as an act of love for humanity"; Moskovitz agrees, saying that he "wouldn't be serving anyone" if he took his \$4 billion and retired (quoted in Marcus Wohlsen, "Facebook Billionaire Shuns Luxury for Startup Life," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, April 29, 2012, accessed April 30, 2012, <http://www.ajc.com/business/facebook-billionaire-shuns-luxury-1428130.html>).

²⁶⁰ According to the company, "80% of [Facebook's] monthly active users are outside the U.S. and Canada" (Facebook, "Newsroom," accessed May 4, 2012, <http://newsroom.fb.com/content/default.aspx?NewsAreaId=22>).

²⁶¹ Facebook "had 483 million daily active users on average in December 2011" (Facebook, "Newsroom").

²⁶² Lars Backstrom, "Anatomy of Facebook," Facebook Data, November 21, 2011, accessed April 27, 2012, <http://www.facebook.com/notes/facebook-data-team/anatomy-of-facebook/10150388519243859>. Backstrom also notes that Facebook's users can readily be connected with one another across the globe: performing a variation of Stanley Milgram's experiment on the notion of "six degrees of separation", the Facebook Data team found that "99.6% of all pairs of users are connected by paths with 5 degrees (6 hops), [and] 92% are connected by only four degrees (5 hops)"; the average number of "hops" between any pair of users is now 4.74 – much less than Milgram's anticipated 6.

are left over a billion times a day. Over 900 million people use Facebook on a monthly basis; over half a billion use it on a daily basis.²⁶³

The Facebook Data team makes a similar set of claims, concluding that

the Facebook social network is at once both global and local. It connects people who are far apart, but also has the dense local structure we see in small communities. We show that, as Facebook has grown over the years, representing an ever larger fraction of the global population, it has become even more connected. In the years to come, we look forward to continuing to illuminate social trends and helping people understand how the world is becoming more connected.²⁶⁴

Similarly, to argue that the site is making its users more “open” with their personal information, I could point to the general disuse of granular privacy controls despite their availability,²⁶⁵ or the way that Facebook has traditionally disincentivized the use of these controls, making them difficult or counter-intuitive to access.²⁶⁶

Although there is thus some evidence that Facebook is making its users more connected and open, I could also argue the opposite. With regard to connection, I could point to the different definitions of “connection” and “relationship”, noting that most of a user’s Facebook “friends” tend to be simply acquaintances. There is a correlation between the increasing use of media and feelings of social isolation,²⁶⁷ and there is some

²⁶³ Chris Cox in jasdhalwal, “Facebook’s Roadshow Video.”

²⁶⁴ Backstrom, “Anatomy of Facebook.”

²⁶⁵ James Grimmelman notes that Facebook has “severe privacy problems” *despite* having “an admirably comprehensive privacy-protection architecture” (“Saving Facebook,” *Iowa Law Review* 94 (2009): 1140): users could opt out of sharing information if they wanted to do so, but the dominant, anti-private culture on Facebook encourages them to do otherwise. This suggests that privacy policies, technical controls, and greater ownership, all of which do not “engage with Facebook’s social dynamics”, will not change the anti-private patterns of use on the site (Ibid, 1141).

²⁶⁶ I address these disincentives in the following sections.

²⁶⁷ Popular and academic writers alike have noted this “paradox of social media”. Stephen Marche, for instance, notes that Americans today have fewer and fewer “confidants”, or “quality social connections”: “the mean size of networks of personal confidants decreased from 2.94 people in 1985 to 2.08 in 2004” (“Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?” *The Atlantic*, May 2012, accessed April 28, 2012, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/8930/>), and Nina Khosla argues that “our ability to be social decreases” as “the size of the network increases”, particularly over 150 people (“The Social Network Paradox,” *TechCrunch*, August 28, 2011, accessed April 28, 2012,

evidence to suggest that this correlation does in fact imply causation.²⁶⁸ With regard to openness, I could suggest that the segmented form of self-identification characteristic of the Facebook profile, in which users describe themselves as a series of characteristics (name, age, sex, sexual preference, religion, political belief, etc.), does not accurately represent the fullness of a person's identity,²⁶⁹ or to the fact that lying about the details of one's life on one's Facebook profile, usually for fun, has taken place since the site's inception. Facebook may claim that the use of the site makes authentic self-representation inevitable,²⁷⁰ but the evidence does not support this.

All of that said, these points do not directly refute the idea that Facebook is achieving its Mission. Does it really matter that we are merely “connecting” with “acquaintances” rather than establishing “relationship” with “friends”? There is nothing in Zuckerberg's public comments or the analysis of the Californian Ideology to suggest that Facebook is being designed to foster some sort of authentic friendship, or a complete, perfect picture of the individual. Facebook may be achieving its Mission, or it may not. The evidence is ambiguous. This is partly due to the ambiguous character of the terms, of course; “openness” and “connection” are far from clear. Since these terms are so

<http://techcrunch.com/2011/08/28/the-social-network-paradox/>), while Sherry Turkle argues that technology reduces relationships to “mere connections” and then falsely elevates connections to the status of “intimacy” (*Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 16).

²⁶⁸ Robert Kraut et al. argue that internet use is associated with “small, but statistically significant declines in social involvement” as well as depression and stress (“Internet Paradox: A Social Technology That Reduces Social Involvement and Psychological Well-Being?” *American Psychologist* 58.9 (1998): 1028).

²⁶⁹ Jaron Lanier goes further than this, arguing that the “self-reduction” that occurs on a social media profile results in changes to the character of the person. Comparing Facebook to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002, in which teachers focus on the standardized material that will be tested, Lanier argues that “[i]n both cases, life is turned into a database. Both degradations are based on the same philosophical mistake, which is the belief that computers can presently represent human thought or human relationships. These are things that computers cannot currently do” (*You Are Not a Gadget: A Manifesto* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010), 69).

²⁷⁰ According to Sandberg, “You can't be on Facebook without being your authentic self” (quoted in Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect*, 210).

unclear, and since Facebook's missionaries do not explore the precepts of their ambitions in detail, *and* since the evidence that might demonstrate that Facebook has or has not carried out its Mission successfully is incomplete, I cannot yet describe what sort of person the website is producing. "Open" and "connected"; "radically transparent": what do these terms mean when made flesh? Has Facebook been successful in its bid to create such an individual? A look at the mechanisms that are used to create this individual will help to clarify these questions, and will show that the person who is being created is not exactly the kind for whom Zuckerberg, Parker, and Thiel hoped.

4.2: The Instantaneous Archive

In its very early days, Facebook was not expansionistic. Access to the site was restricted to Harvard students; there was an air of exclusivity about it. Soon, though, Zuckerberg expanded the service to other universities and high schools "on a slow march toward ubiquity".²⁷¹ By the fall of 2006, the site had opened up access for anyone over 13 years old, and since then, the site has seen widespread global adoption. This expansion has been fuelled in part by the introduction of features or services for its users, from the introduction of the Wall in 2004 to Timeline in 2012. These services are generally designed to capture attention and extend Facebook's digital reach.

News Feed

²⁷¹ Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect*, 149.

Facebook introduced News Feed in 2006. At the time, users who were interested in finding out what was happening in their friends' lives needed to navigate to their friends' profiles, where the latest information would be on their Walls. The inconvenience of this prompted Facebook to invest in what Parker referred to as "the biggest technology challenge the company had ever faced":

[T]o write a set of software algorithms to dissect the information being produced by Facebook's users, select the actions and profile changes that would be most interesting to their friends, and then present them to those friends in reverse chronological order. Each person's home page would thus be completely different depending on who their friends were.²⁷²

After News Feed – a "personal newspaper published by the people that you care about",²⁷³ or an algorithmic aggregation of the different things your friends do on Facebook – information for which users once had to "dig" was now easily available. In Kirkpatrick's account, News Feed revolutionized Facebook and social media in general:

It was the harbinger of an important shift in the way that information is exchanged between people. It turned "normal" ways of communicating upside down. Up until now, when you desired to get information about yourself to someone, you had to initiate a process or "send" them something, as you do when you make a phone call, send a letter or an email, or even conduct a dialogue by instant message.²⁷⁴

Sharing information with one's friends in this way took effort; the process was not "friction" free, and it therefore impeded Facebook's expansion. When News Feed was introduced, it "reversed this process. Instead of sending someone an alert about yourself, now you simply had to indicate something about yourself on Facebook and Facebook

²⁷² Quoted in Ibid, 181.

²⁷³ Cox in jasdhalawal, "Facebook's Roadshow Video."

²⁷⁴ Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect*, 193.

would push the information out to your friends”. This meant that a Facebook user could now “stay in touch with many people simultaneously with a minimum of effort”.²⁷⁵

News Feed, then, made it *easy to read* things – to read *information* – about your friends. In a sense, it took the initiative away from the people who might be interested in sharing something and gave it to the people who were interested in just reading; it made it easy to learn new things about your friends by simply browsing Facebook.²⁷⁶

Beacon and Connect

Beacon, introduced in 2007, was designed to help a user share his or her activity on third party sites with his or her friends by way of Facebook. If the user was logged in to Facebook while on a partner site, his or her activity on those sites would be automatically published on News Feed: if I were to purchase an item on an external website, for instance, news of that purchase would be communicated to my friends. This would help advertisers provide more targeted advertisements to my friends and I, and would draw users to external sites, thereby generating revenue for both Facebook and these partner sites. This would also help extend Facebook’s presence on external websites. Facebook’s users, however, were not impressed by Beacon. The service was

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Saying that Facebook removed the initiative from people might be overstating the case. Another reading would suggest that News Feed just displaced the initiative, and in fact opened up further opportunities to take initiative in contacting your friends. Facebook’s own description of News Feed’s effects lies somewhere between the two: “Facebook and other social media allow for a type of communication that is *somewhat less taxing* than direct communication. Technologies like News Feed and RSS readers allow people to *consume content* from their friends” in “an environment where everyone is *passively engaged* with each other” (Cameron Marlow, “Maintained Relationships on Facebook,” Facebook Data, March 9, 2009, accessed April 28, 2012, http://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=55257228858, my emphasis).

designed to be invisible²⁷⁷ – so invisible, in fact, that users were not told that they were using it: the service was opt-out rather than opt-in. Users complained vociferously, and Facebook responded by first making the service opt-in, then giving users the ability the turn Beacon off,²⁷⁸ and eventually shutting the service off completely.²⁷⁹

Facebook's response to the unpopular service might suggest that the company listens to its users, but another service demonstrates that this is not true. In 2008, with Beacon continuing to draw Facebook's users' ire, the company modified the service, changed its name, and introduced it to the Facebook community. Like Beacon, Connect transmits users' activity on external websites back to News Feed, given the users' permission (which often means clicking the "Like" button on that website – a more complicated act than it might seem);²⁸⁰ this would "give you the stories we think you'll find most interesting and relevant".²⁸¹ Additionally, Connect also allowed users to log into external websites using their Facebook profile, in a sense taking Facebook with them across the web. Connect, then, introduced only slight modifications to Beacon, one of which actually extended its reach: now, users could show their friends what they were

²⁷⁷ According to Zuckerberg, Facebook first "tried to make it very lightweight so people wouldn't have to touch it for it to work" (Mark Zuckerberg, "Thoughts on Beacon," *The Facebook Blog*, December 5, 2007, accessed April 28, 2012, <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=7584397130>).

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ "Facebook Turns Lights Out on Beacon," *The Register*, September 23, 2009, accessed April 28, 2012, http://www.theregister.co.uk/2009/09/23/facebook_beacon_dies/. Zuckerberg later acknowledged that Beacon had been a "mistake" (Mark Zuckerberg, "Our Commitment to the Facebook Community," *The Facebook Blog*, November 29, 2011, accessed April 28, 2012, <https://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=10150378701937131>).

²⁸⁰ For a brief argument concerning the complicated power relationships at play in the Like button, see Hannah Sung, "The Power of Facebook's 'Like' Button," *The Globe and Mail*, January 22, 2011, accessed April 30, 2012, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/life/fashion-and-beauty/hannah-sung/the-power-of-facebooks-like-button/article1877332/>.

²⁸¹ Facebook, "Login with Facebook," accessed April 28, 2012, <http://www.facebook.com/help/?page=229348490415842>.

doing regardless of their digital location. Connect was met with relatively few objections.²⁸²

Facebook uses Beacon and Connect to extend its reach over the internet. These services extend Facebook along a “spatial” axis, ensuring that its users take their identities with them across the web, that they collect information on their activities, and that they have more reasons to return to the News Feed. For this to be possible, of course, Facebook must have already spread out over much of the web. In 2007 and 2008, Facebook’s reach was somewhat tentative; in 2012, internet users can see Facebook’s “Like” button everywhere on the net – on sites as diverse as *The Globe and Mail*, *Something Awful*, and *Dinosaur Comics*. This button, according to Zuckerberg, weaves a “fabric that can make any product experience social”.²⁸³

Eventually, though, Zuckerberg hopes to take Facebook beyond the internet, both to improve the service that it already offers on mobile devices,²⁸⁴ and to extend Facebook’s reach into the “internet of things”:

Zuckerberg imagines Facebook as, eventually, a layer underneath almost every electronic device. You’ll turn on your TV, and you’ll see that fourteen of your Facebook friends are watching “Entourage,” and that your parents taped “60 Minutes” for you. You’ll buy a brand-new phone, and you’ll just enter your credentials. All your friends – and perhaps directions to all the places you and they have visited recently – will be right there.²⁸⁵

²⁸² Facebook is used to its users complaining when services are introduced. When News Feed was introduced, for instance, Facebook’s engineering team “sat and watched as reactions from Facebook’s 9.4 million users started coming in. The very first one read, ‘Turn this shit off!’” (Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect*, 189).

²⁸³ Mark Zuckerberg in jasdhalival, “Facebook’s Roadshow Video.”

²⁸⁴ Facebook’s \$1 billion acquisition of Instagram in April, 2012 is widely regarded as an attempt to corner the mobile photo sharing market. The acquisition is notable not just for its monetary value, but for what it reveals about how Zuckerberg sometimes operates: he negotiated the purchase “mostly on his own”, and only alerted the board of directors hours before it went through (Shayndi Raice, Spencer E. Ante, and Emily Glazer, “In Facebook Deal, Board Was All But Out of Picture,” *The Wall Street Journal*, April 18, 2012, accessed April 30, 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304818404577350191931921290.html>).

²⁸⁵ Vargas, “The Face of Facebook.”

This reading certainly captures Facebook's expansionistic ambitions, but it does not entirely describe how Facebook would operate in this future scenario, or how it operates now. Facebook is not only a *layer underneath* our electronic devices, communicating with itself and making our lives simpler and more informational; rather, Facebook can be understood as a layer on top of our understanding of the world – something so close to the source of our perception and so effective that it changes our experiences in advance, much like a pair of glasses. As a layer on top of the world, Facebook could be described as a condition of possibility of our experience of the world; we would think of the world in Facebook's terms, and we would do so without giving this mediation, or the minimalist Facebook itself, much thought.

Facebook's spatial expansionism recalls Jorge Luis Borges's "On Exactitude in Science", a story short enough to quote in its entirety:

...In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it. The following Generations, who were not so fond of the Study of Cartography as their Forebears had been, saw that that vast Map was Useless, and not without some Pitilessness was it, that they delivered it up to the Inclemencies of Sun and Winters. In the Deserts of the West, still today, there are Tattered Ruins of that Map, inhabited by Animals and Beggars; in all the Land there is no other Relic of the Disciplines of Geography.²⁸⁶

Much like the map of the Empire lies across the surface of the world, Facebook's lies across the surface of the internet. This, at least, is the company's ambition: Facebook

²⁸⁶ Jorge Luis Borges, "On Exactitude in Science," in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley, 325 (New York: Viking, 1998).

intends both to map the connections between users²⁸⁷ and to be the medium through which an internet user accesses the (digital) world. At the least, it should be present across the web – a continual reminder of a coherent unity at the heart of a Facebook browsing experience based around Facebook.

For Jean Baudrillard, “On Exactitude in Science” should be understood prophetically and descriptively: it announces the hyperreality of the contemporary age. The map does not simply lie over top of a world that comes before; if this were the case, we could peel back the map and reveal the world underneath. But we cannot reveal this world; all we have, and all, in effect, we have ever had, is the map. It is therefore the map that “engenders” the territory rather than the other way round: simulacra precede that which they are supposed to simulate.²⁸⁸ The precession of these simulacra changes our relationship to “the real”, either insisting that the real conform to the simulation or abandoning the real entirely as a world lost beyond recovery under a perfect map. Put differently: with the conflation of the simulation and the thing being simulated, “the sovereign difference, between one and the other” – between real and imaginary – disappears, and in this disappearance the real itself is annihilated. What passes for “reality”, which is to say the simulacrum, is produced.²⁸⁹

Baudrillard’s description of the hyperreal applies directly to Facebook’s spatial expansionism. In its extension over the internet, Facebook, as simulacrum, precedes the internet. In order to gain access to a news story on a site like *The Guardian* from

²⁸⁷ Chris Cox says that “there’s never been is a map of everybody in the world and their relationships with each other. By giving each person the responsibility for their own story, their own point in that graph, together, you have this amazing map of people” (jashdaliwal, “Facebook’s Roadshow Video”).

²⁸⁸ Jean Baudrillard, “The Precession of Simulacra,” in *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 1.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

Facebook, for instance, one must go through the identity authentication process enabled by Connect. This does not completely annihilate the “reality” of the content hosted on *The Guardian* – the term seems inapplicable to the “material” of the internet from the get go – but it does change how we access it. Additionally, this authentication process changes the way that information is presented and processed. If I know that Connect will send a message to News Feed when I navigate from Facebook to an article on *The Guardian*, I may think twice about navigating to that article. Will it reflect well on me? Will it send the right message to my friends? Framing the article through Facebook introduces panoptic, or synoptic,²⁹⁰ effects that change the way that I engage with it. Similarly, framing the rest of the content of the internet, not to mention the internet of things, in Facebook’s terms will change how I engage with the internet as a whole. At a minimum, then, Baudrillard’s simulacrum suggests that Facebook’s spatial expansion will change the way that we access the always already partial reality of the internet.

Timeline

Facebook’s ambitions extend beyond the spatial. With Timeline, the company is expanding along a “temporal” axis, not only touching on where a user goes, but recording that information for archival.

²⁹⁰ Thomas Mathiesen distinguishes between Foucault’s Panopticon and what he sees as a more appropriate model for the mass media society, the Synopticon, in “The Viewer Society: Michel Foucault’s ‘Panopticon’ Revisited,” *Theoretical Criminology* 1.2 (1997): 215-34. In the Synopticon, the many watch the few rather than the other way round. Noting that the internet enables the many to watch the many, Aaron Doyle updates Mathiesen’s argument in “Revisiting the Synopticon: Reconsidering Mathiesen’s ‘The Viewer Society’ in the Age of Web 2.0,” *Theoretical Criminology* 15.3 (2011): 283-99.

Where News Feed marked a shift in how users share and access information, Timeline marks a shift in how they present their lives. The older style of profile lacked narrative coherence: it presented a user with many different boxes into which to place information. These boxes were automatically lined up with one another so that someone browsing the profile could click on different sections – profile picture, Wall, info, photos, notes, friends, and any third party applications that the user might have added – to access different information. Though this profile did not present the browser with an easy narrative, he or she could piece one together with a little effort. If I wanted to know what a friend of mine had been doing recently, I could look at her status updates and check the pictures in which she had been tagged, paying attention to the dates they were posted; I could even track her activity across other websites, insofar as she had accessed them through Facebook, thanks to Connect. But this took effort, without which users' lives lacked narrative coherence.

Timeline automatically generates that narrative coherence. It is a sort of digital scrapbook: it collects “your most memorable posts, photos, and life events”²⁹¹ into a single historical line, placing photos that were taken in 2007, for instance, down towards the bottom of the profile, and those that were taken yesterday at the top. If a user is curious to see what happened in a particular year or month, he or she can easily navigate to that period, where photos will be juxtaposed with events, comments, videos, and so on.²⁹² The presentation is notably smoother than the old profile, and notably more

²⁹¹ Facebook, “Introducing Timeline: Tell Your Life Story with a New Kind of Profile,” accessed April 29, 2012, <http://www.facebook.com/about/timeline>.

²⁹² Timeline is better seen than described. For a video presentation of this new type of profile, see *Ibid.* The video presents the life story of Andy Sparks, showing photos, videos, and commentary from his infancy, childhood, and adulthood, through to where he has a child of his own (who looks into the camera and asks, “Dada?”). The video packs an emotional punch – as a viewer, I felt overwhelmed by a dizzying array of

coherent as well, since it is now much easier to get an impression of the story of someone's life. It is much easier to tell one's own life story, too, since Timeline requires no more work from its users than the old profile did: Facebook automatically adds new information to the right spot on the Timeline, collecting a series of small moments into "the story of your life".²⁹³ Users can curate this information if they so choose, hiding certain information, doubling the size of key events, or adding captions to photos, for instance,²⁹⁴ but Timeline does not require this sort of effort to function.

If Timeline were only to promise narrative coherence, it would be no more significant than any other scrapbooking or journal service. Timeline, however, adds an automatic element to Facebook's monopolistic market position, bringing ease of creation together with the internet's most formidable collection of personal data and photos. The automaticity of Timeline works through applications native to Facebook, of course – when other users tag you in a picture, for instance, this photo is added to your profile in the appropriate place – but it also works through third party applications. If you install the Nike+ application, for instance, and go for a run with a GPS-enabled smart phone, that run becomes informationalized: the distance covered, your average speed, the path you took, and so on are all recorded and added to the application's database. Additionally, however, that information can be automatically added to your profile: go for the run, and that fact is automatically added. The same goes for other GPS-based

feelings the first few times I watched the condensed collection of beautiful life events – designed to convince users that they should adopt the new profile, because then they too could present their lives this way.

²⁹³ Mark Zuckerberg, quoted in M. G. Siegler, "Facebook Unveils Timeline: The Story of Your Life on a Single Page," *TechCrunch*, September 22, 2011, accessed April 29, 2012, <http://techcrunch.com/2011/09/22/facebook-timeline/>.

²⁹⁴ Samuel W. Lessin, "Tell Your Story with Timeline," *The Facebook Blog*, September 22, 2011, accessed April 29, 2012, <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=10150289612087131>.

third party applications (like Foursquare)²⁹⁵ and applications restricted to the internet (like that offered by The Onion)²⁹⁶ – thousands of them. In Facebook’s video explaining the role of third party applications on Timeline, it demonstrates how services like Spotify automatically notify others when you listen to a particular song via Open Graph and Ticker,²⁹⁷ giving them the opportunity to listen to the same thing, or how Foodily does the same with food, or how Nike+ can notify friends when they are running in the same location at the same time.²⁹⁸ The video thus demonstrates how this third party sharing automatically creates not only a more complete “story of your life”, but communities of interest as well.

All of this looks very much like Zuckerberg’s vision of a more open and connected world: Timeline presents your life story in a near-automatic fashion, making it easy to transparently reveal who you really are, and facilitates connections with your friends. Coupled with Facebook’s other services (News Feed, Connect, Open Graph, and Ticker) and third party applications, Facebook may indeed be able to fulfill its Mission, generating a radical transparency that the company believes will lead to more

²⁹⁵ Foursquare allows users to “check in” to different locations around a city, creating a database of where they go and how often. The service is partly a game – users can compete to check in most frequently – and partly a means of obtaining information about and discounts on services. In a nutshell: “foursquare makes the real world easier to use” (Foursquare, “About Foursquare,” accessed April 29, 2012, <https://foursquare.com/about/>). Note again the language of ease.

²⁹⁶ The Onion, of course, knows exactly what it is doing: “Shove The Onion down your friends’ throats. Log in to Facebook now to see what your so-called friends are reading and watching, and to let them see every fucking thing you’re reading and watching” (quoted in John Constone, “Nike, Foursquare, VEVO Launch Facebook Timeline Apps, 3000 Others Already Have,” *TechCrunch*, March 12, 2012, accessed April 29, 2012, <http://techcrunch.com/2012/03/12/facebook-timeline-apps-nike-foursquare/>).

²⁹⁷ Open Graph, introduced in 2010 and modified substantially in 2011, maps users’ connections to one another, the things in which they are interested, the things they have “Liked”, and so on. Ticker, which runs down the right side of a user’s Facebook page, and which was introduced in 2011, continually updates itself with news from a user’s friends (Daniel Terdiman, “What Facebook Announced at F8 Today,” *CNET*, September 22, 2011, accessed April 30, 2012, http://news.cnet.com/8301-1023_3-20110181-93/what-facebook-announced-at-f8-today/).

²⁹⁸ Facebook, “Introducing Timeline.”

information, profit, authenticity, empathy, and happiness, and, in the end, to a better world.

Archive Fever

But are these services operating as intended? Facebook's press releases suggest that the company views its users as active agents whose use of Facebook will lead, through the "rewiring" engendered by the site, to a specific modification of their behaviour. While I find the idea that Facebook is "rewiring" its users possible, I find much less convincing the idea that Facebook is producing active, agential individuals who willingly open themselves up and connect to others to generally profitable ends. Facebook's various services certainly create the conditions under which this sort of active agent could become rewired, but the site does not necessarily create active agency itself. In fact, Facebook, along with many other social media services, seems to invite a much more passive interaction; the language of "ease" runs through the social web, and finds particularly clear expression on Facebook's new archived subject.

This new archive, and the dream of an easy life that goes along with it, is not in fact so new. Computer technologies have long been heralded by optimists as a way to make our lives easier, but these technologies have always come with additional challenges. On Facebook, these challenges involve the need to dig for information, the slight irritation of having to type out a complete user name and password to log in to Facebook from a computer you do not normally use, or struggling with the clunky interface used on mobile phones. For computers in general, the problems involve similar

small frustrations. David Gelernter describes these problems in 1994 in the *Washington*

Post:

I don't want to save bits of paper any more, nor computer disks nor videotapes, nor do I wish to care about whether my home computer is compatible with my office computer, or about any other such boring and preposterous compatibility questions, or lug a laptop computer with me on trips, or be out of touch anywhere I go. Nor do I want to organize my computer documents into "files," nor be obliged to make up silly names every time I create documents. I want software to pay my bills and prepare tax returns at the push of a button, with zero input from me. I want my life to be perfectly organized, and I want to spend no time whatsoever organizing it.²⁹⁹

Gelernter might sound petulant or entitled, but he is no simple techno-optimist; he came to the *Post* with a solution called the "lifestream":³⁰⁰

Your "lifestream" captures your whole life, in terms of chunks of information: letters, documents, bills, bank statements, video footage of your son's first birthday party, a database, anything.... You can look at the entire stream – picture a caravan of shoe boxes, the most recent addition being the closes to you, receding into the far distance. You can fly backwards over the stream, navigating with a joy-stick.³⁰¹

The description closely resembles Timeline: Facebook's service also "captures your whole life, in terms of chunks of information" (though it focuses more on things like video footage of important life events than bills and bank statements),³⁰² and you can look at anything over the course of your captured life. Best of all, Timeline, like Gelernter's dream of the lifestream, makes it *easy* to record, store, and recall captured information. Timeline enables "frictionless sharing" – a variation on Bill Gates' promise

²⁹⁹ David Gelernter, "The Cyber-Road Not Taken," *The Washington Post*, April 3, 1994, C1.

³⁰⁰ Gelernter did more than just write about the lifestream in newspapers: he also supervised the doctoral work of Eric Thomas Freeman, who wrote a dissertation on lifestreaming ("The Lifestreams Software Architecture," (PhD diss., Yale University, 1997)), and founded a company with Freeman called Mirror Worlds.

³⁰¹ Gelernter, "The Cyber-Road Not Taken."

³⁰² Other services available today can perform these tasks, of course, though it would not be a surprise if Facebook were to start partnering with the post office, banks, or data management companies.

of “friction-free capitalism”³⁰³: all barriers to information should be removed because information, like money, *wants* to flow freely. When it comes to the market, this free flow will enable unprecedented capital accumulation; on Facebook, it will enable the unprecedented accumulation – and sharing, and, most importantly, viewing – of personal data.

Again, it would be easy to criticize Facebook on the basis of how it wields its monopolistic market power, or how it forcefully changes privacy norms, or even how it fails to implement friction free sharing properly,³⁰⁴ but these criticisms miss what is, for me, the most important point: easy sharing is not an unadulterated virtue. Easy sharing is in fact burdened with problematic psycho-social consequences, which Sherry Turkle demonstrates these at length in *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other*.³⁰⁵ She presents a condensed version of her book’s main thesis in a 2012 TED Talk,³⁰⁶ arguing that we use technology more and relate to one another less because technology addresses a foundational human vulnerability – the need to relate to one another. However, because we are afraid of the pain of loneliness and the vulnerability of intimacy, we use technologies like social media to control our relationships, keeping people just close enough to be accessible, but not so close that they

³⁰³ Bill Gates, with Nathan Myrhvold and Peter Rinearson, *The Road Ahead* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996).

³⁰⁴ On the latter point, see Molly Wood, “How Facebook Is Ruining Sharing,” *CNet*, November 18, 2011, accessed April 30, 2012, http://news.cnet.com/8301-31322_3-57324406-256/how-facebook-is-ruining-sharing. Wood accurately notes that “the goal of the [Open Graph] initiative is to quantify just about everything you do on Facebook”, but she proceeds to criticize for doing so imperfectly: “[i]n search of ‘frictionless’ sharing, Facebook is putting up a barrier to entry on items your friends want you to see” by requiring that you permit a third party application to access your Facebook profile, thereby “creating Friction. Even if it’s just a onetime inconvenience, *any* barrier to sharing breaks sharing”. Above all else, sharing must be *easy*. Wood argues for “conscious” over “passive” sharing, but sees no contradiction between this suggestion and the quantitative, informational framework that Facebook is developing.

³⁰⁵ See especially “No Need to Call,” *Alone Together*, 187-209.

³⁰⁶ Sherry Turkle, “Connected, But Alone?” TED Talks, April, 2012, accessed April 30, 2012, http://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together.html.

might make unreasonable emotional demands of us. We connect with each other, in other words, but we neither establish intimate relationships nor give ourselves the space to dwell in solitude. We “solve” what we choose to describe as the “problem” of loneliness. Turkle sums this up by adapting Descartes to the social world:

[C]onnection is more like a symptom than a cure: it expresses, but it doesn't solve, an underlying problem. But more than a symptom, constant connection is changing the way people think of themselves; it's shaping a new way of being. The best way to describe it is, “I share, therefore I am”.³⁰⁷

We build relationships, and therefore identities, on the basis of technologically mediated *connections* with others. Turkle continues:

We use technology to define ourselves by sharing our thoughts and feelings even as we're having them. So, before it was, “I have a feeling; I want to make a call”. Now it's, “I want to have a feeling; I need to send a text”. The problem with this new regime of “I share, therefore I am”, is that if we don't have connection, we don't feel like ourselves. We almost don't *feel* ourselves. So what do we do? We connect, more and more.³⁰⁸

We connect more and more easily – this has been one of the goals of technologists like Gelernter for decades, and Facebook has helped them to realize it – but “in the process, we set ourselves up to be isolated. How do you get from connection to isolation?”³⁰⁹

Part of the explanation here comes down to the way that technology in general, and social media like Facebook in particular, makes connection such a pleasant state. Sharing now requires very little effort, and browsing requires virtually none. Additionally, users tend to share and browse without any awareness that they are doing so, as I argued in the second chapter: they may begin by deciding to go on Facebook, but

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Ibid.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

they often come to be unthinkingly captivated by the site, or bored *with* it. Facebook's founders noticed this process at work in the site's very early days:

Over the summer, Zuckerberg, Moskowitz, and Parker had coined a term for how students seemed to use the site. They called it "the trance." Once you started combing through Thefacebook it was very easy to just keep going. "It was hypnotic," says Parker. "You'd just keep clicking and clicking and clicking from profile to profile, viewing the data." The wall was intended to keep users even more transfixed by giving them more to see inside the service. It seemed to work. Almost immediately the wall became Thefacebook's most popular feature.³¹⁰

Since 2005, the hypnotic power of Facebook may well have grown, benefitting from the site's attention capturing services and the content provided by hundreds of millions of users. The trance unconsciously entices users to remain in a state of digital connection but physical isolation. This may help explain how we have come to be "alone together".

The "trance" might explain how connection turns to isolation on social media, but it would not necessarily explain why Turkle's argument obtains more widely. Why is it that we share so much in the first place? For Jacques Derrida, we share information because we are "in need of archives":

[T]o be *en mal d'archive*... is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away. It is to run after the archive, even if there's too much of it... it is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.³¹¹

The archive gives us an origin. We once had to construct this origin – fabricating parts of it and turning fuzzy details into clear representations – but we no longer have to do that. The world, understood in an ontological, foundational sense as information, can be automatically recorded for us. We need not go to the work of building it from our

³¹⁰ Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect*, 93.

³¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 91.

memories. Still, this does not mean that we lose the “passion” to archive; if anything, we return to the archive even more “compulsively” and “repetitively”. We can certainly return there more quickly, sometimes immediately after an event has taken place, thanks to the instantaneity, in principle and increasingly in practice, of Timeline. And our nostalgia for events that have only just occurred becomes just as instantaneous.³¹²

When we turn so frequently to Facebook’s easy archive, we change the character of that which is archived. Derrida notes that “archivization produces as much as it records the event”³¹³ – that the medium of archival influences the character of that which is archived. Baudrillard is more provocative: the archive destroys that which it archives, just as the simulacrum destroys the real. This is not a destruction from which the real can recover; it is not as if we have simply been fooled by a cruel deceit that we could cast off with enough effort. Lanier makes a similar argument when he discusses the phenomenon of software “lock-in”. As software becomes widely used, other programs begin to make use of it. The more that this happens, the more difficult it becomes for the writer of the original software to make changes that do not disrupt an entire software ecology. This means that software ends up “embedding” a particular understanding of the world.³¹⁴ MIDI, for instance, “locks” the billions of computers, phones, and other electronic devices that rely on it into unfortunately simplified representations of the acoustic world.³¹⁵ Applied to Facebook, Lanier’s argument suggests that Facebook “locks” identity “in” to an impoverished representation of the real human. To return to the idea

³¹² Laura June, “Editorial: Facebook’s New Sharing Is Anything but ‘Frictionless,’” *The Verge*, September 25, 2011, accessed April 30, 2012, <http://www.theverge.com/2011/9/26/2450405/editorial>.

³¹³ Derrida, *Archive Fever*, 17.

³¹⁴ Lanier, *You Are Not a Gadget*, 7-14

³¹⁵ “The whole of the human auditory experience has become filled with discrete notes that fit in a grid” (Ibid, 9).

that the profile “destroys” the person in Baudrillard’s sense, this impoverished representation becomes, in a sense, more important than the real thing: Facebook mobilizes the basic data of your profile to bring you advertisements and determine what appears on your News Feed, and your “friends” connect with you in ways that differ on the basis of this profile data.³¹⁶ Lanier sometimes overstates his case,³¹⁷ but his observations about the structural effects of generally invisible code – how the “binary character at the core of software engineering tends to reappear at higher levels”,³¹⁸ turning relationships and many other things into context-free binary choices (friends or not; liked or not; in a relationship or not), for instance – ring true.

The simulacrum might completely destroy the real. If it does not, we might still argue that it becomes privileged over the real – that we pose for photos, for instance, simply so that they can be recorded and browsed;³¹⁹ that we can spend less time catching up with friends because a quick glance at their profiles tells us that they have just gotten married, had a baby, or landed a job; that we look at our email accounts in order to get a picture of our lives – and that we would not want to give any of this up.³²⁰ At a minimum, we can claim, with Derrida, that Facebook provides evidence of an archive fever, and that the precise way that it archives data influences the data itself.

³¹⁶ “[D]igital reduction becomes a causal element, mediating contact between new friends” (Ibid, 69).

³¹⁷ “[E]nergized young people”, he says, “must manage their online reputations constantly, avoiding the ever-roaming evil eye of the hive mind” (Ibid, 70).

³¹⁸ Ibid, 71.

³¹⁹ “When I go out with my friends, there is always a camera present, for the singular goal of posting pictures on Facebook. It’s as if the night didn’t happen unless there’s proof of it on Facebook” (Shaun Dolan, quoted in Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect*, 206).

³²⁰ “Those who use Blackberry smartphones talk about the fascination of watching their lives ‘scroll by.’ They watch their lives as though watching a movie. One says, ‘I glance at my watch to sense the time; I glance at my Blackberry to get a sense of my life.’ Adults admit that interrupting their work for e-mail and messages is distracting but say they would never give it up” (Turkle, *Alone Together*, 163).

In burning for the archive, or privileging the archive over the event, we may see evidence of a reaction unique to the contemporary period. The archive may be a reaction to the disposability of the digital world. Turkle notes that email, text, and other forms of digital communication seems to be inherently disposable; their ubiquity and inevitability give the sense that they have been disposed of in advance. Turkle fears that we will begin to treat other people, and even ourselves, in the same terms: “the connected life encourages us to treat those we meet online in something of the same way we treat objects – with dispatch”.³²¹ To return to the argument from the third chapter, the ground beneath our feet has become shaky. Facebook, in turning people into profiles and friends into connections, has contributed to that loss of interpersonal stability. We react to that loss by looking for something permanent – the archive in general, which gives us the illusion of a return home, and Facebook’s virtual subject in particular, which gives us a permanent place there.

The archive, however, does not simply give us permanence, or the picture of a return to the origin; it also gives us something that lies there available – something not to be used, controlled, or made an instrument, but simply browsed.

4.3: The Virtual Subject and the Digital Reserve

We browse Facebook as we browse the internet, skimming News Feed for interesting stories, occasionally clicking through to an interesting link, and sometimes leaving what we hope will be an interesting comment. Facebook archives this collection

³²¹ Turkle, *Alone Together*, 168.

of interesting things alongside major life events, thereby rendering these things coherent and extending itself across time as well as space.³²² It carries out this expansion in accordance with its Mission to make the world more open and connected. Beyond ideology, though, Facebook's expansion, and the means by which it achieves this expansion, suggests a change to the way that we think about the world. Facebook provides evidence of the new, ambiguous political norms of openness and connection, to be sure, but these norms can only obtain given a world conceived in informational terms.

The above should all be clear from the connections between the Californian Ideology, services like Timeline, and Baudrillard's and Derrida's comments on the simulacrum and the archive. Here, I would like to situate these connections in a clearer picture of the browseable nature of Facebook's picture of the world. To do so, I will briefly return to the ideas from the previous chapters, further modifying the conception of virtual boredom from something that predisposes us to treat the world as a collection of disposable things to something that predisposes us to treat it as things that have already been disposed of and archived, and that now lie in front of us waiting to be browsed.

As I argued in the third chapter, Heidegger's conception of *Bestand* suggests that we understand and treat the things of the world as disposables, or things that stand in front of us and invite us to use and discard them. Following Rojcewicz, I argued that there is a sense in which these disposable things are always already disposed of. The discussion of Facebook amplifies and clarifies this idea: Facebook changes the world from a standing reserve of things to be used – controlled in an instrumental fashion so

³²² Cox himself highlights Facebook's focus on "interesting" things: "Publishers want distribution and eyeballs. People who are coming to Facebook want interesting things to see from their friends. If we can create the connective tissue that helps drive traffic to all of these different publishing platforms, and can bring to Facebook a more interesting and coherent experience of what's going on in the world, that is just a win-win for everyone" (jasdhaliwal, "Facebook's Roadshow Video,").

that a particular accumulative end can be achieved – to a standing reserve of things to be recorded, narrativized, and shared.³²³ We value the things of the *digital* reserve for their nostalgic value, or the value that they hold for momentarily catching our interest. Our concern, in fact, is less the archival or dissemination of information than the *browsing* of it. This concern can be clearly discerned in the longstanding push to automatically collect and arrange the details of one’s life. In collecting and arranging personal and social details, Timeline generates a record of our lives: it poses our selves in front of ourselves as browseable collections of interesting information. And because Timeline does this automatically, the entire process requires a minimum of effort from us. Whether bored or interested, we can distract ourselves with pictures of our selves. It is in this sense of aiming for distraction that we have already disposed of the things of the world: these things are, in the medium term, less important than our ability to reflect on or be distracted by them. As services like Facebook enhance their reach, they enable us to organize the world as a series of interesting (or boring) distractions available for us, thereby establishing a fundamental distance from the world in what Espen Hammer describes as a “pure beholding”.³²⁴

Why organize the world in this fashion? Why emphasize browsing over use or control? The problem with applying the language of use and control to the view of the world engendered by modern technology (as *Ge-stell*) is that it suggests an agential

³²³ To return to the question of privacy from the introduction, this generalized disinterest in control and increasing interest in distraction may explain the privacy paradox: we do not make use of the privacy controls available to us because we care less about controlling our privacy than we do about ensuring that interesting material is available for browsing.

³²⁴ While being bored with (social media) leads to a “disconnecting [of] fallen *Dasein* from the responsibility involved in comporting itself in accordance with its possibilities of Being, curiosity effects a form of uprooting whereby *the seeing itself*, rather than tarrying alongside the seen, becomes its own goal” (Espen Hammer, “Being Bored: Heidegger on Patience and Melancholy,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 12.2 (2004): 284).

investment in the world that is belied by our browseable comportment to Being. When it comes to social relationships, the language of use and control would constitute an investment in the lives of others. This runs counter to Turkle's observations about the way that we often deploy social media. For Turkle, we want to "control" the world only insofar as we can make it safe: we want to bring people close enough to be available without threatening to make demands on our emotions or our time, but we also want to ensure that they do not drift so far away that we would become lonely. We want social media to mediate those relationships that might demand something of us while providing us with just enough intimacy so that we do not have to act. This is why we would rather send a text than make a phone call, or send email on a Blackberry rather than talk to people in a meeting.³²⁵ Social media enable a relational stasis, and the repetition and expansion of services like Facebook extend this stasis – this browseable comportment to Being – across the world. If the thesis on historical ontology holds, this suggests that *Ge-stell* must be reconceived in the language of ease and archival rather than the language of control and disposal.

A virtual subject accompanies this new view of the world. This subject is not what it once was – the multiple, hybrid identity of the 1990s, spread out over many different sites and presenting many different faces. Now, you have a single identity that follows you everywhere.³²⁶ This subject is connected to other single identities, and openly disclosed to the world. It is a variation on the classical liberal, economic subject, atomistic, rational, and self-interested: connected and informational; narrativized and

³²⁵ Turkle, *Alone Together*, 15.

³²⁶ Zuckerberg finds the notion of multiple identities anathema: "'You have one identity,' he says emphatically three times in a single minute.... 'Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity'" (Kirkpatrick, *The Facebook Effect*, 199).

receptive; virtual in its tentative purchase on a world understood as a *screen*³²⁷ to be browsed.³²⁸ This subjectivity is built through a repeated engagement with the quotidian medium of the internet – something casual and inconspicuous, to return to Heidegger’s language of boredom, and something that works to so effectively construct subjectivity because it holds the subject in a state of temporal abeyance.

4.4: Conclusion: Augmenting Reality

Happy the man who is an observer! Boredom, for him, is a word devoid of sense.

— Victor Fournel, quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*

The contemporary understanding of the world that treats it as a screen sounds like something to be criticized – something that, if we could just call enough attention to it, could be revealed for what it really is; something we would want to dismantle. The reality, however, is that this understanding of the world is seductive.³²⁹ *We like*

³²⁷ Marco van Leeuwen notes that “when the window on the world becomes a computer screen, human phenomenology shifts from experiencing life and the world that comes from being an embodied and embedded agent, to consuming pre-processed impressions that comes from being a virtual presence with different personalities and properties, depending on the website, chatroom or game” (“The Digital Void: e-NNUI and Experience,” *Critical Studies* 31 (2009): 177-201). He complicates this picture, however, arguing that experiences on the screen can exceed their apparent limits.

³²⁸ In “The Age of the World Picture”, Heidegger situates the *subiectum* at the centre of *Ge-stell*, arguing that it is the Cartesian *subiectum* that enables the world to be conceived as a picture (Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” in *The Question concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, 115-54 (New York: Harper and Row, 1977)). Given the modifications that I am suggesting to *Ge-stell*, it might also be appropriate to suggest that we look at the world today not as a picture, but as a screen.

³²⁹ “Seduction” might be the wrong word to use to describe Facebook’s world. “Obscenity” might be better. When the internet makes private public, Baudrillard claims, the most intimate processes of our life become the virtual feeding ground of the media... Inversely, the entire universe comes to unfold arbitrarily on your domestic screen (all the useless information that comes to you from the entire world, like a microscopic pornography of the universe, useless, excessive, just like the sexual close-up in a porno film): all this explodes the

watching; we *like* narrative; we *like* being bored. In short, we like the convenience of holding the world in reserve – of valuing it because it can be browsed.

Google knows this. Their “Project Glass” is an incredibly seamless presentation of the convenience of augmented reality.³³⁰ In the “Project Glass” video clip, we see a man of the (near) future from his point of view. As he wakes up, he puts on a pair of glasses equipped with an augmented reality interface – a wearable computer.

Transparent grey icons appear in his field of vision, resting comfortably over top of his view of his apartment, now made slightly blurry by his focus on the icons. He makes coffee, and a reminder pops up: “See Jess Tonight / 6:30 PM”. He looks out the window, and sees that the weather is a pleasant 58 degrees, with a 10% chance of rain. He eats a premade sandwich, simultaneously texting his friend Paul. Leaving the apartment to meet Paul for coffee, his glasses inform him that subway service is suspended.

Thankfully, they also present him with a walking route to his destination, which appears laid over top of his vision of the city. He walks to a bookstore where he uses his glasses to navigate its music section, buying a book about how to play the ukulele. After meeting Paul, he walks on, pausing to take and share a picture of interesting graffiti. He ends his day at the top of a building, where he takes a call from Jess. He turns “View share: ON”,

scene formerly preserved by the minimal separation of public and private (Jean Baudrillard, *The Ecstasy of Communication*, 20).

We react to this obscenity not with disgust, but with idle interest. We have now grown accustomed to seeing our lives on the screen, and no longer feel fascinated by the novelty of services like Facebook. Given this state of saturation, we require ever more. To again use Baudrillard’s language, we grow “obese” with data (Jean Baudrillard, “Paroxysm: The End of the Millennium or the Countdown,” *Economy and Society* 26.4 (1997): 447-455). Because the norms and rules around privacy on Facebook are so lax, we can amass data like so much indigestible starch: “Now, in an age of uncontrollable inforrhea, the opposite of publicity is, as Zuckerberg correctly points out, no longer privacy, but Facebook, publicity carried to the extreme, elaborated to the nth degree” (Anton Steinpilz, “Pataphysical Graffiti: Facebook and Privacy’s End,” *Generation Bubble*, January 13, 2010, accessed April 8, 2012, <http://www.generationbubble.com/2010/01/13/pataphysical-graffiti-facebook-and-privacys-end/>).

³³⁰ Google, “Project Glass: One Day...” YouTube, April 4, 2012, accessed April 30, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9c6W4CCU9M4>.

enabling her to see what he sees, and plays her a song on his ukulele, looking out at the cityscape.³³¹

This description does not do justice to the seductive pull of the video. The power of Google's vision lies not just in its usual impeccable design but in its effortlessness: Google promises that Project Glass will do a lot of inconvenient work for you. Delay in the subway? No problem: Project Glass will tell you about it long before you pack yourself into a crowd of confused, waiting passengers. Don't know where to find that book? No problem: Google has the store's floor map on file, so you don't have to ask a clerk. Project Glass will one day deliver the world to you, and you won't even have to ask.

Facebook also promises to deliver you the world. The boxes in which Facebook's world can be expressed are already there; all you have to do is fill them in. Populate your profile with a little bit of activity and you can enjoy browsing through the profiles of others. Facebook may be more primitive than Project Glass, but it dreams big: one day, we will be able to access Facebook's archival data about other people with the same convenience with which we access Google's data about street maps.

Google and Facebook share the same dream of an augmented, effortless, transparent world where technology will finally deliver us our freedom. But what sort of freedom is this? What is it that we want to do with our time? What kind of connections do we want to make with other people? The evidence from Facebook, as I argued above, suggests that we are building connections that are not very deep, and Google's video

³³¹ For a very different conception of an augmented future enabled by wearable computing, see Steve Mann with Hal Niedzviecki, *Cyborg: Digital Destiny and Human Possibility in the Age of the Wearable Computer* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2001).

supports the argument. Part of the way through the video, the man of the future meets his

Paul outside of the bookstore:

Man of the Future: “Hey dude! How’s it going?”

Paul: “Want to check out that new place I was telling you about?”

Man of the Future: “Sure!”

Paul: “This [food] truck’s really good.”

Man of the Future: “Hey, just a second.”

The man of the future then pauses to “check in” to the food truck, interrupting their conversation to register his location. “Cool,” he says. Drinking coffee, their exchange continues:

Paul: “Good to see you again!”

Man of the Future: “Thanks, man.”

Paul mutters something incomprehensible, and then the glass wearer says, “See you, dude!” and walks off.

What sort of connection is being forged here? I am calling attention to it because it illustrates a particular conception of the human that is common to Google, Facebook, and the other companies that subscribe, knowingly or not, to some version of the Californian Ideology. In this conception, the human is he who purchases, connects, records, and shares. In purchasing, connecting, recording, and sharing, he may happen to engage in the sort of conversation that helps relationships flourish, but this is incidental to the technology. The technology is supposed to create the conditions in which this conversation can take place, of course – after all, without the technology, the man of the future might not have met up with his friend to share that cup of coffee – but it makes no guarantees.

The technologies that enable us to “augment” reality, and the more primitive Facebook technology that enables us to archive subjectivity, itself a form of

“augmentation”, can lead to unintended consequences. Project Glass, for its part, makes it possible for the man of the future to ignore the world around him – the city and the people – and focus on augmented representations of them instead. Insofar as these representations lie in front of the real that they are intended to represent, they obscure that real; the two begin to blend, much like the map that begins to “rot” into the world it covers. This enables the man of the future to take the most efficient path to his goal, minimizing the chances of inconvenience and the chances of chance encounters, moving toward a pre-conceived connection.

Even when these chance encounters do take place, they are less likely to be the sort that inspire frustration, that demand our attention, or that we would simply rather not have. With the help of an electronic guide, we avoid the irritation of walking down the wrong street and losing time. With music playing continually – at the end of the Project Glass video, we find that the man of the future has been in control of the soundtrack in the background over the course of his day – it is easier to ignore the requests of homeless people or invitations to converse with strangers. In themselves, these changes in the way that we interact with the city *may* not be a bad thing, but when the convenient path that they establish becomes the only path that a user ever takes, this user loses some of the experiences that used to be common to urban living. All technologies set us into these sorts of paths to a greater or lesser extent, but those that are close to us, that we use all the time, do this much more than others: as we use them more and more, we find ourselves following the paths that they set for us with more consistency. These paths may lead us to make connections, but there is no guarantee that those connections will be meaningful.

Additionally, they will make it difficult to establish unexpected connections with others, or to experience emotions other than those that we desire.

This is the real sense in which Facebook operates as a map on top of reality: it obscures the *dirt* of the world – those inconvenient “imperfections” that impede friction free movement. Facebook may map the world at a scale of one to one, but it remains a *map*, free of the imperfections of the people whom it maps. It helps its users present cleaner, better curated versions of themselves, and helps them avoid the difficult demands that they sometimes face when they navigate the rocky terrain of friendship. Insofar as the users of social media turn to this “Open Graph” of the world with greater frequency, they face fewer social inconveniences – but this will not prevent these inconveniences from arising in day to day life. People lose their way. When they do, Facebook’s users may find that they are worse equipped to deal with them than they were before the map made things so simple.

Chapter 5: The Voice of the Internet

Facebook insists on the singularity of identity. Its appeal lies in the coherence and convenience of this singularity: it *identifies the world* as something knowable and browseable, and it encourages its users to *identify themselves* as people with transparent interests on a profile. Facebook emblemizes an open, connected, and informational individualism.

Reddit is different. Its users can certainly be identified by way of usernames, comment histories, and karma scores, but they are identified first as foremost *as Redditors* – as members of a community – and only secondly as individuals. Where Facebook tries to render itself invisible, becoming a transparent skin laid across the surface of the net, Reddit takes pride in its visibility. One of the claims that I want to make in this chapter is that the visibility of this community distinguishes Reddit (and a few other online communities of this sort) from Facebook, and that, more importantly, it is in fact this community that is the primary, but often unconscious, draw for Redditors: they come for the comments, not for the links. Additionally, even though Redditors are identifiable as users with particular usernames, these usernames do not interpellate them in the same way that a Facebook profile does. Facebook is a recognized authority figure, and Reddit is a mischievous renegade. If Facebook is the police officer calling you from the street, Reddit is the crowd drunkenly welcoming you to the bar.

Facebook knows your name, and it uses it in any number of unpleasant ways; Reddit neither knows nor cares about your name, and it seems to shy away from those unpleasant uses. On Reddit, you are pseudonymous. Since this is the case, and since I

argued earlier that there may be structural, metaphysical problems with certainty and identity, there may be something virtuous in the ambiguity of Reddit's pseudonymity: Reddit opens up a host of ambiguous possibilities that might exceed the singular logic of sites like Facebook. But I want to argue that the karma system closes this ambiguity down just as it opens it up. It does this in at least two ways: it induces informational cascades that result in a peculiar communal consensus, and it repeatedly generates, and dashes, faith in the community on the basis of the ambiguity of identity. I will examine each of these effects of the karma system in turn.

I also want to return to one of this dissertation's initial ideas – that ambiguity might be “good” and certainty “bad” – throughout this chapter in order to demonstrate its problematic character. More importantly, I want to show that the interesting thing about the ambiguity of the internet is not this apparently static and adversarial characteristic, but rather the way that ambiguity is *resolved*, first, and then *instated* as something of foundational importance. The (non-)resolution of ambiguity on Reddit illustrates a new facet of virtual boredom, drawing us deeper into its psycho-onto-logic.

Before discussing the three ways that Reddit opens and closes ambiguities, I will explain in greater detail how the karma system works, and why it is so significant.

5.1: Karma, Number, Speed

There are four kinds of karma scores on Reddit. Two are global – each Redditor has a cumulative link score and a cumulative comment score – and two are local – each Redditor has an individual link score and an individual comment score. The karma score

is displayed on the user page, so it can give the curious a rough idea of how active and well integrated any particular Redditor is. Although I will make occasional reference to global karma scores, I will generally focus on individual karma numbers, since those are the ones that the casual user sees most frequently and that shape her experience and actions most profoundly.

Because the site is only as good as the links that comprise it, the system rewards users that make quality contributions. The karma system is the mechanism for doling out those “rewards”, and it is, as a whole, benign and practical. It works incrementally and collectively: when a Redditor submits a popular link, she receives upvotes from other Redditors and thereby increases her score, which, the theory goes,³³² encourages her to submit further good links. Popular links receive upvotes and unpopular ones do not, so Redditors browsing the front page see those submissions that have already been judged meritorious. Comments on these links are similarly judged. This means that a casual visitor to Reddit sees the best of what the hivemind³³³ has to offer – a collection of entertaining, witty, provocative, insightful, or absurd links, and a large assembly of corresponding commentary. Although these links and comments often relate to material that one might find on major news websites, they will also include critical commentary on that material or links to alternative perspectives. Additionally, because karma is the mechanism for judging these stories, they will often appear alongside links to text,

³³² A user’s cumulative points – her karma score – provide a measure of “how much good the user has done for the reddit community” (Reddit, “Reddit FAQ,” accessed January 29, 2011, <http://www.reddit.com/help/faq#WhatisthatnumbernexttousernameAndwhatiskarma>).

³³³ The term might sound pejorative, but it is only sometimes used in a negative sense (when, for instance, someone suggests that Redditors are acting like a lynch mob – operating according to the worst excesses of groupthink). Usually, Redditors happily refer to themselves as members of the hivemind, hoping that the term conveys some of the transhuman qualities of swarm intelligence, distributed computing, or even collective consciousness.

images, or videos that have been highly ranked for a completely different reason. For instance, it is not uncommon to see a link to an important news story juxtaposed with a joke, a request for advice, or a trailer for an upcoming game. This juxtaposition does not reduce them to equal value – no one browses under the illusion that funny pictures are as significant as reports from countries in revolt – but it does render them equally susceptible to karma, which is to say judgment: the structure of the website invites users to pass judgment on the quality of everything so that we, collectively, will spend our time there more profitably.

Many websites let users rate submissions and comments and display them accordingly, so Reddit's karma system is not unique – but it seems to do its job uniquely well, filling the site with engaging and constantly changing material that rewards return visits. A large part of the reason for this success is the prominent but tasteful *display* of karma. Each submission and comment is accompanied by a number and two arrows, grey on white. They are subtle enough to ignore, but never so unobtrusive as to be forgotten. It is possible to browse Reddit without looking at the karma scores directly, but it is impossible to avoid them entirely. Even if one can ignore the numbers and look only to the comments, one cannot ignore the way that they affect the ranking and presentation of the comments: the higher the score, the more quickly they enter a Redditor's awareness; the lower the score, the greater the chance that they will not be seen at all. So while a karma *score* may be just that – a *number* – this is not without consequence. The ubiquitous presence of karma scores beside submissions, comments, and usernames means that we can expect them to have some sort of structural effects. Numerization is the first of these, and speed is the second.

The karma system turns opinions into *numbers*: Redditors vote each other up when they agree with what has been said and down when they disagree. This is not exactly how the system is supposed to work,³³⁴ but Redditors have gotten used to it. The number beside a submission or a comment has become a direct, simple index of the popularity of a point of view. While it is possible to ignore the numbers on Reddit, their prominent situation on the page makes it much more likely that a Redditor will pay them attention. A number beside a post comes with its own context because submissions and comments are ranked according to their popularity. The number orients the Redditor.³³⁵ Usernames, in fact, are usually irrelevant to the content of a post, only becoming relevant during sustained conversations (when identifying authors is important – I provide an example of this when I discuss informational cascades) or in joke threads (when usernames may relate directly to the topic – I provide an example of this when I discuss memes). A submission’s comparative, numerical popularity is second only to the appeal of its title in determining my attention, and is sometimes even more important: something may strike me as uninteresting, but I will usually click through to it if enough other people seem interested. I am inclined to trust the hivemind.

The simple, numerical basis of the interface makes navigation *fast*: a Redditor can move from submission to discussion at speed. There is very little time for reflection – reflection not on the topic, which the Redditor will probably find interesting to some

³³⁴ “Reddiquette” dictates that one should never vote down a well constructed comment, regardless of disagreement, nor vote up a poorly constructed one.

³³⁵ The numbers that appear on Reddit orient users at a partly conscious level. Similar numbers on other sites are much more conscious or explicit. Klout.com, for instance, “measures [a person’s] influence” in a “Klout Score” that aggregates his or her activity on a variety of social network sites (Klout, “The Klout Score,” accessed May 2, 2012, <http://klout.com/corp/kscore>). This sounds benign, but the “Score” can have consequences that extend well beyond social media – into a person’s chances of getting a job, for instance. For an example, see Seth Stevenson, “What Your Klout Score Really Means,” *Wired*, April 24, 2012, accessed April 26, 2012, http://www.wired.com/epicenter/2012/04/ff_klout/.

extent, but reflection on the fact of the navigation and what it signifies (like the other things that the Redditor might be doing instead). The incessant stream of new stories strengthens this attention capture, providing alternatives to the submission or discussion in question but encouraging the Redditor to remain within the boundaries of the site as a whole. Additionally, numerization facilitates the fast judgment of submissions and comments, which further contributes to this attention capture. Any submission or comment presents the Redditor with a simple binary choice, up or down, that will affect its ranking, and this choice is as susceptible to brash reaction as it is to careful consideration.

Quick, simple judgments mean that the Redditor is able to assess a large amount of information quickly, and again, this assessment is not innocuous, since the more that someone makes use of a system, particularly one that provides pleasure, the more that person becomes used to it, encultured by it, or addicted to it. Robert Breen and Mark Zimmerman have demonstrated that the time that it takes to become addicted to gambling, for instance, correlates with the degree to which the activity is machinic.³³⁶ This is precisely because the medium denies the player the possibility of stepping back and considering her actions. Where traditional forms of gambling offer the player at least

³³⁶ Robert B. Breen and Mark Zimmerman, "Rapid Onset of Pathological Gambling in Machine Gamblers," *Journal of Gambling Studies* 18.1 (2002): 31-43. See also Mattathias Schwartz's insightful commentary in "The Hold-'Em Holdup," where he connects the addiction induced by the speed of online poker to its eventual appearance as both the cause of and solution to all of one's problems: "Rarely leaving their rooms, they take their laptops with them to bed, fall asleep each night in the middle of a hand and think, talk and dream nothing but poker. By the time Patrizi finally quit, the game seemed to be both the cause of all her problems and her only means of escaping them" (Mattathias Schwartz, "The Hold-'Em Holdup," *The New York Times Magazine*, June 11, 2006, accessed April 19, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/11/magazine/11poker.html>). Online poker seems to induce a virtual boredom in which the world finds itself reduced to the net, or in which the net comes to stand in for the world.

some space, even if it is as brief as the time during which one hand is finished and another hand is dealt, machines offer no such relief:

[M]any slots players describe the machines as reassuringly hypnotic. The visual stimuli, the repetitive pattern of betting and outcome, and the chance to withdraw into one's own world are features that may contribute to this perception. Machines are the most continuous medium of gambling. Bets can be made and decided in a matter of seconds, with virtually no delay before the pattern is repeated. Machines are non-threatening and user-friendly to the uninitiated, thus they may offer an unparalleled "gateway" activity to gambling.³³⁷

The internet as a whole, and certainly Reddit in particular, can be understood in similarly stimulating, repetitive, continuous, friendly, and fast terms. Clicking on a link from Reddit's home page is, in a sense, a gamble: the Redditor does not know whether she will be rewarded with something interesting (you win!) or confronted by something boring (you lose!). But this gamble has a high probability of winning and what seems to be a very low opportunity cost: the Redditor loses only time – never money. More importantly, the links presented on the front page are incredibly easy to move through: if the Redditor "lost" on the last site, she can come right back and try again. The speed of hypertext is even greater than the speed of slots, which means that addictive behaviours should form even more rapidly online.³³⁸

The potentially addictive character of Reddit is based, in part, on the frame of mind that even a casual interaction with the site engenders. The karma system's numerical foundation and the rapid adjudication of content to which it gives rise contribute to the worldview of disposability familiar from the third chapter. The

³³⁷ Breen and Zimmerman, "Rapid Onset of Pathological Gambling in Machine Gamblers," 32.

³³⁸ In addition to the host of popular stories about internet addiction (IA) and the numerous centres devoted to treating it, a number of psychologists, physicians, and researchers have recently argued that IA should be treated as a clinical disorder. For an argument from the symptomatic basis for IA, see, for instance, Jerald J. Block, "Issues for DSM-V: Internet Addiction," *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 165.3 (2008): 306-7; for an argument from a purely physiological basis, see Yan Zhou et al, "Gray Matter Abnormalities in Internet Addiction: A Voxel-Based Morphology Study," *European Journal of Radiology* (2009): 92-95.

submissions and comments can easily be thought of in terms of *Bestand* in any of the senses discussed before: they stand in reserve; they are at our disposal; they are only a means to a worrisome end.³³⁹ Additionally, their ubiquity means that they can be understood in the totalizing terms of *Ge-stell*: Reddit's submissions and discussion gather together the things of the world within the terms of *Bestand*, imposing upon them the "unreasonable demand" that they become disposable. Finally, the numerical character of submissions and comments reveals a world that is "already-known", at least in principle: it is defined, measured, calculated, predicted.³⁴⁰

Karma scores on their own and the karma system as a whole are such strong symptoms of and contributors to this worldview precisely because they are *scores* and *systems*. In his discussions of the development of modern science and modern technology, Heidegger devotes special attention to the importance of numbers.³⁴¹ In order for the world to be made disposable, it must be understood with precision; if it can be quantified precisely, then it can be catalogued, systematized, and made ready for use. This is as true for the hard sciences as it is for the soft: the astronomer needs to calculate the distance between stars and the actuary needs to place a dollar value on death. This requirement, Heidegger insists, actually precedes the sciences, since there would be no modern science without the prior inception of the essence of modern technology. However, once established, modern science reinforces the drive to number, demanding that the world be rendered *increasingly* numerical.

³³⁹ Comments and submissions are sometimes worrisome because, in seeking meaningless distraction, I render myself as meaningless as the things that distract me. This is an extension of Heidegger's discussion of the first aspect of the danger posed by *Ge-stell* (Heidegger, "The Question concerning Technology," 27).

³⁴⁰ Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture," 118-19.

³⁴¹ "The Question concerning Technology", "The Age of the World Picture", and "Science and Reflection" are devoted at least in part to the importance of number.

Again, Reddit can be understood in similar terms. The binary worldview according to which things can be pushed up or down preceded the website; it was a natural extension of the connecting and implicitly adjudicating logic of hypertext (if a term was linked, it was because the site designer thought that its reader would find the linked page useful in some sense). However, Reddit's increasing popularity is extending this logic into new territory, helping to bring the world (of social media) under the sway of a new way of looking. This process is twofold. First, assessment tools are becoming increasingly common: upvotes and downvotes find companions in likes and dislikes, thumbs up and down, tomatoes fresh and rotten. Second, those things that are not already packaged with an assessment tool can be brought to one by way of a link from Reddit or a connection to Facebook.

This process of extension is as pervasive and powerful as it is because it is accompanied by a structural, almost moral, injunction: not only *can* a link be assessed – it *should* be assessed. That injunction is what lies behind the motto for Reddit's iPhone app: Reddit is “the best of the web”.³⁴² If I am to maximize the value of the time that I spend online, I need tools to help me navigate the net. The best possible tool is Reddit's. The karma system is modelled on democracy and the market, and this is a good start: the front page will expose me to what the majority decides is best. But Reddit also has the

³⁴² The description of the app, iReddit, is serendipitous for my thesis: “Never be bored again. With this app, you'll always be only a tap (or shake) away from the most interesting stuff on the web” (Condé Nast Digital, “iReddit,” iTunes Preview, January 10, 2011, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://itunes.apple.com/ca/app/ireddit/id302732279?mt=8>). The medium here is significant. If smart phones had existed years ago, it would not have been possible to browse Reddit by iPhone because at that time the site was more than a collection of links to funny pictures: the content was more complicated, usually taking the form of large chunks of text on independent websites. Those sites are hard to render on the iPhone. In fact, it is difficult to render anything complicated on an iPhone. Today, since the site has changed its character, becoming simpler, it is relatively easy to make Reddit into an app. But the medium did not exactly precede the message. As Heidegger argues, it is the metaphysics that comes first: we think about a particular kind of world (i.e. an easy, funny, distracting one), we collect a set of links that reflect that world, and we then use the iPhone to enframe it neatly, comfortably, ubiquitously. At *that* point the iPhone reinforces the metaphysics; at *that* point the medium and the message harmonize.

advantage of narrowing the democratic population from everyone to only those who share my peculiar interests – narrowing it, that is, to white, male, straight, liberal atheists in their early 20s.³⁴³ Although I do not perfectly fit the demographic, I have chosen this community, and I trust its collective judgment more than I would trust the judgments of those communities into which I have been unwillingly thrown. The karma system distills this chosen community's opinions, presenting only the submissions and commentaries that have been judged highly, and I return to Reddit over and over because of this distillation. If the karma system were to break down – if Reddit's users were to stop doing their judicial duty – I would have no reason to return.

Clustering together a group of people with a relatively narrow set of interests tends to result in an internal consensus that is quickly followed by the exaggeration of marginal divisions.³⁴⁴ The internal consensus is the product of willingly joining a particular community: I tend to accept the hivemind's opinions because I consciously chose to join the hivemind. The exaggeration of marginal divisions is evident not just on Reddit, where it manifests in sometimes heated discussions, but on every site that collects users around a particular topic – and the narrower the topic, the more exaggerated the divisions. This exaggeration happens because of simple, everyday boredom. On a site about massively multiplayer games, for instance, where I have immediate access not only to industry news but to reviews, strategy guides, guild discussions, fan fiction, walkthroughs, playthroughs, and historical comparisons, I can quickly drink my fill, becoming bored even of the topic that I find so engaging. This is the simple by-product

³⁴³ Informal surveys have demonstrated that Reddit's population is relatively homogeneous, displaying just these characteristics. See, for instance, the survey conducted in October 2010 by user JavaLSU, "Reddit Survey!", accessed February 12, 2011, <http://redditsurvey.zxq.net/results.php>.

³⁴⁴ On this process, see Bill Wasik's embedded, experiential discussion in the second and third chapters of *And Then There's This: How Stories Live and Die in Viral Culture* (New York: Viking, 2009).

of a glut of information. In order to combat that effect, the site's writers tend to exaggerate every achievement and failure: an "epic win" will result in praise, and an "epic fail" will call down scorn. The writers are only trying to attract attention, but by making an appeal to extremes, they train their audience to think in similarly polarizing terms – and this polarization reinforces the numerization with which Heidegger is so concerned.

5.2: Informational Cascades

Polarization certainly takes place on Reddit, but it does not set in automatically; the default karma score is neutral, not up or down. This in-between state is a site of potential, and the ease with which it transitions from an initial neutrality into a binary helps to explain Reddit's psychological hue. Because binaries are the domain of rational choice theorists, and because Redditors tend to think of themselves as rational beings, I will turn to the theory of informational cascades³⁴⁵ in order to shed some light on this complicated process.

Marbles

³⁴⁵ The theory was first formalized in a now classic paper by Sushil Bikhchandani, David Hirshleifer, and Ivo Welch ("A Theory of Fads, Fashion, Custom, and Cultural Change as Informational Cascades," *The Journal of Political Economy* 100.5 (1992): 992-1026). My summary is based on this paper and on the authors' later popularization of it (Sushil Bikhchandani, David Hirshleifer, and Ivo Welch, "Learning from the Behaviour of Others: Conformity, Fads, and Informational Cascades," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 12.3 (1998): 151-170).

Cascade theory is easiest to explain by example. Imagine that I have a bag of red and blue marbles. I tell you that the bag contains one of those colours in a majority, and I tell you and the crowd of which you are a part that I want you to guess which colour is the majority. Each person in the crowd will draw one marble from the bag, look at it, put it back, and then declare to the crowd what she thinks the majority colour will be. If the first person draws blue, she has a single piece of information. Because she is rational – we are assuming that everyone here is rational – she must base her decision on any and all information that she has available to her. Since she knows only that her marble is blue, she says that she thinks that the rest of the marbles will be blue. The second person to draw from the bag will now have two pieces of information available, since she drew a marble of her own and heard the declaration made by the first person. If this second marble is blue, she will also predict that the rest will be blue. Once this happens, the colour drawn by the third person is completely irrelevant since she will have two pieces of information that will outweigh the third. Even if she draws red, she still knows that the majority of the marbles that have appeared so far have not been red, and she therefore declares blue. At this point, an informational cascade sets in: everyone that follows declares blue in sequence.

Stepping back a few steps, we can see that the chances of the cascade setting in with the second person are quite high. Even if this second person draws red rather than blue, she has just as much reason to declare blue as she does red, since the two pieces of information at her disposal are equally valid. (It is not rational to assume that her marble should bear any more predictive weight than that of the first person.) The declaration is a coin flip. If she decides to declare red, the first and the second declarations effectively

cancel each other out, and the process begins again. Because the process will begin over and over again, a cascade will eventually take place with near perfect certainty.³⁴⁶

The informational or economic problem with this first example is obvious: what if the majority of marbles were actually red, and the first two people just had the bad luck to draw the minority colour? Each individual in the cascade would have rationally made the wrong prediction. The model might seem narrow, and so the worry might seem small, but the model actually applies fairly widely. The stock market, for instance, operates according to the same process – find a small piece of information, sell your stocks, and then watch as everyone else does the same – and some forms of public, sequential voting do too. With these larger systems, such suboptimal decisions are obviously a serious worry, especially for economists and policy makers. Although I am interested in exploring the ramifications of informational cascades, I will postpone this discussion for the time being in order to explain why the theory is so useful for understanding Reddit.

Consider your reaction when you first read a comment. Your own thoughts are like seeing the colour of the marble: you know whether you agree or disagree with the comment. You can signal your thoughts to others by voting the comment up or down, if you so choose. Your votes, then, are like the declarations of colour: they are a signal that other people can see. This means that the karma system is similar to the marble example above: we usually hear declarations or see votes, but we do not usually see colours or hear thoughts. (You can certainly choose to explain these thoughts to everyone else through

³⁴⁶ These chances scale with the number of people in the crowd. For details, see Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer, and Welch, (“A Theory of Fads, Fashion, Custom, and Cultural Change as Informational Cascades,” 997-98.

an additional comment in addition to your vote, but if the 90-9-1 rule holds,³⁴⁷ we can assume that most Redditors do not comment: many read, some vote, some fewer comment, and the fewest – perhaps 1% – submit. Nevertheless, I will return to the important effects of commenting shortly.) This suggests that our votes will be shaped by those votes and comments that came before. Because Redditors are generally confident in their own opinions, the extent of the effects of prior votes and comments will be fairly small in most circumstances: they will not let a few upvotes convince them that their disagreement should not be signalled by their own downvote. That said, the effects of prior votes and comments are much larger when an ambiguous or uncertain comment is present. Examining how the karma system works in this sort of situation will illustrate these effects.

The Importance of Being Earnest

In September 2010, thenoahreaction's father was murdered in Costa Rica for his backpack. The local police were unable to provide substantial assistance, so Noah – the Redditor's real name – turned to the internet for assistance, creating a website and a Reddit post requesting information and promising a monetary reward.³⁴⁸ Most of the Redditors replying to his request were sympathetic and offered what advice they could,

³⁴⁷ Internet wisdom holds that 1% of internet users create all of the web's content, while 9% comment on or contribute to that content and 90% simply read or watch it. The precise numbers may vary: Charles Arthur, for instance, suggests that 10% contribute ("What Is the 1% Rule?" *The Guardian*, July 20, 2006, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2006/jul/20/guardianweeklytechnologysection2>).

³⁴⁸ Justice for Steve Edelson, September 23, 2010, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://justiceforsteve.wordpress.com/>, and thenoahreaction, "Please Help Me Find My Father's Murderer," Reddit, accessed May 2, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/comments/dkjzz/please_help_me_find_my_fathers_murderer.

generally suggesting changes to his website; one Redditor, for instance, suggested that it be translated to Spanish, and another replied with a translation. Two comments differed substantially, however, and they caught my attention. In the first, Slender_Loris wrote the following: “Dude, I troll people for a living, but to all the people mocking this and cracking jokes on behalf of this tragedy... FUCK OFF”. In the second, sexinariverwithu echoed the sentiment: “The amount of terrible jokesy responses in this thread is disturbing as hell”. Curious about the kinds of jokes that someone might make in response to the death of someone’s father, I scrolled to the bottom of the 700 comments, looking for the lowest-voted. They were not particularly funny.³⁴⁹

I returned to sexinariverwithu’s comment and read the responses. Most were sympathetic, but one had a distinctly ambiguous meaning, and my reaction to it can be explained in the terms of informational cascades. A Redditor named jjandre wrote the response in question:

Pogo_, -6: I’ve gone through and reported all of them [i.e. the offending comments]. Not sure how much good it would do, but if I were a moderator of this sub I would ban them without a second thought.

jjandre, -36: Don’t be a d-bag. The man comes here asking for help, he should get a good dose of absurdity along with it.

Reading the response and seeing the large negative score that accompanied it, I immediately added another downvote. Why, I wondered, would someone joke about absurdity in this context? The thread continued, and I continued reading:

Pogo_, 25: No, you’re right. The man (or woman) whose father was murdered 20 days ago deserves to be ridiculed. Please accept my deepest apologies.

³⁴⁹ These included “It was professor Plum in the conservatory”, “Hello! My name is thenoahreaction. You killed my father. Prepare to die”, and “I’m sorry for your loss but I’m fairly certain Batman has more important things to do during the day than browse Reddit”.

jjandre, -21: I guess you didn't get that my comment was facetious, and that I was mocking those who mocked him. Perhaps I should speak more slowly so that you can understand what I am saying.

The respective votes, up for Pogo_ and down for jjandre, made the sympathies of most Redditors clear. Pogo_'s sarcasm was immediately understandable; jjandre's aggression, on the other hand, flagged him as a troll. I upvoted the former and downvoted the latter. But I also decided to respond, saying the following:

DeathInABottle, 7: There was nothing whatsoever in your comment that would indicate that it was facetious. It only made you look like an asshole.

jjandre, -7: What do you mean? I recognized that someone came here asking for help, fully acknowledged that, then I stated that he deserved to be ridiculed. Why would you not interpret that as facetious? Are you not a human being?

Again, the sympathies of Reddit were clear. But I was starting to become confused: jjandre was unpopular, and he had a problematic way of expressing himself, to put it mildly, but he was consistently arguing that we were all misreading him. His initial claim about absurdity was designed to be so ridiculous as to be unbelievable. This is clear from a generous reading of his last comment: "Why would you *not* interpret that as facetious?"

Suspecting, at this point, that jjandre might be something other than a troll, I decided to continue the conversation.

DeathInABottle, 1: I wouldn't interpret it as facetious because there are a number of people at the bottom of the page who did in fact provide the OP with "a good dose of absurdity". They were downvoted into oblivion, but they're there. So why not interpret your comment along the same lines?

EDIT: To be clear, I understand that you were joking – or at least that you claim that you were joking – and yeah, your original statement seems so ridiculous that it should be hard to take it as anything but satire. But that assumes that the community that provides the context for the comment is sympathetic, and I think that that's a bad assumption given, well, trolls.

At this point, he and I were buried in a lowly-voted, nested thread; we were talking only to one another. We entered into a conversation about the importance of context in shaping reactions online, especially on Reddit. He argued that people should consider others' comments on their own merits, without context if possible, and I argued that this was almost impossible. My claim had to do with the particular context of the thread. The Redditors who thought he was a troll (and who voted him down accordingly) were inclined to do so because the comment to which he was replying *concerned* trolls. They were the closest thing to mind:

I wasn't expecting satire; instead, I was expecting cruelty somewhere in the comments. Your comment wasn't cruel, but it seemed careless. That was close enough to associate it with trolling in my mind.

So yeah: it's the immediacy of the context that counts. I was thinking about trolling itself more than I was thinking about the ridiculous nature of trolling someone going through a grieving process.

We continued to talk for a while, and then broke off; he went back to baiting people, and I wrote out some notes based on our conversation.

Now, my claim in that thread concerned the context provided by the subject matter in particular: Redditors were reading a thread that was emotionally demanding – someone's father had been murdered – and sexinariverwithu's comment had them on the lookout for trolls.³⁵⁰ But a comment's context, and therefore the reception that it will receive, is provided by more than just content. Karma also provided context here. Karma, in fact, provides context everywhere on Reddit – and does so in a disambiguating, binaric fashion.

³⁵⁰ I listed some of the thread's jokes above, and omitted the more overt, explicit provocations. Examples include "Go kill yourself, you fucking faggot", "I bet he died screaming, and crying like a little bitch", and "Your father's music is great. Just kidding".

Consider again the first comment: “Don’t be a d-bag. The man comes here asking for help, he should get a good dose of absurdity along with it”. This lends itself, I admit, to a negative reception, but it could also be read generously – which, in this context, means sarcastically. Jjandre might have been criticizing the trolls peppering the thread with offensive comments, or he might have been acting as a troll himself. The comment, in other words, was ambiguous. When it is read without the context provided by a prior upvote or downvote, the reader will not necessarily incline one way or the other for structural reasons, but will instead have to consult her own thoughts.

The first reader, in other words, faces a situation similar to the first person to draw a marble from the bag. She responds to the site’s injunction – vote me up or vote me down – based only on her own opinion. In the case of jjandre’s comment, we can imagine that the first reader decided to vote it down. The next reader sees that the comment is at -1, and therefore has two pieces of information. This additional information perhaps prompts her to think about the comment in terms of the content-based context, too: the downvote means that jjandre is probably a troll, so the reader is inclined to be sceptical. This second reader has three pieces of information, and therefore votes it down too. Now at -2, it becomes difficult for this comment to claw its way back up. A *karmic* cascade has begun: the increasingly large number beside the comment indicates that the comment has been written by a troll, and that it should be downvoted. The reader no longer needs to analyse the comment herself.³⁵¹

At first, I was caught up in the cascade, but I broke out of it eventually and reversed my votes. I did this not because I decided to carefully reconsider jjandre’s

³⁵¹ In the terms of informational cascades, additional *information* about the truth of the situation, which is to say jjandre’s real intentions, is no longer accumulating.

comments or because I had some sort of epiphany, but because I saw jjandre's original correspondent, Pogo_, become convinced that she had misread the initial comment: "You're right, I didn't get it. Sorry; I was just a bit angry with the people denigrating the OP's loss. My bad". I would not have decided to reconsider jjandre's intent on my own, but the addition of countervailing information compelled me to do so. This demonstrates one of the most important features of informational cascades: they are *fragile* – susceptible to suddenly changing with the addition of new information. To return to the marble example, we can imagine that a blue cascade might be interrupted by someone who accidentally draws two red marbles from the bag at once. Looking at the information – a raft of declarations for blue, with not a red declaration to be found – the individual lucky enough to draw two red marbles suspects that the previous guessers have been misled. Indeed, she knows, being rational, that everyone has been making guesses based on little more than private information, since the accumulated declarations are not adding any information. With the two red marbles in hand, she has good reason to predict that the majority of the marbles are red, not blue. At this stage, the cascade is reset, allowing for the possibility of a red cascade to begin.

To what extent is the karmic cascade fragile? To what extent, that is, do readers pay attention to the conversational context in contrast to the numerical one? This might seem too individual- and context-specific to advance an answer; there are simply far too many reasons that a person might or might not latch onto the addition of fresh, cascade-breaking information. If I were to suggest an inclination, it would be towards the numerical context. I would argue that Redditors tend to pay more attention to the numbers than they suspect, using them as a catalyst for moving through the site and

touching on little pieces of information rather than really processing it. My reason for this would be Heidegger's insistence on the growing dominance of *Ge-stell*, that worldview that reduces things to number. But even without this argument about inclination, I can still claim that the karmic cascade is *not* fragile in the same way that the simple informational cascade is fragile. This is because one dissenting "voice", which is to say one vote, does not reset the cascade – it only steps it back by a single increment. If something already has dozens of up- or down-votes, this single step back will not change the minds of newcomers, who will still see a double-digit number, and be slightly inclined to agree with the majority.

This is not to say that comments cannot dislodge a karmic cascade, of course – well crafted comments regularly give Redditors, many of whom pride themselves on critical or scientific mindsets, pause – but to say that comments tend to be less important *at a structural level* than karma scores. The scope of a single comment is limited, but the scope of the karma system, in the sense of its functional presence on the site, is truly global. In fact, the extent of karma's scope, and therefore the extent of karmic cascades, should include the psychological as well. Voting a submission or a comment up or down is not simply an expression of opinion; it is an expression of *judgment* about the correctness of the thing in question. Are the marbles mostly red or mostly blue? There is a correct answer to the question. Is jjandre a troll or just a poor communicator? There is a correct answer here, too. And recall my comment from earlier: because Reddit's mandate is to bring its users the best of the web, there is an incentive, even an injunction, for its users to accurately assess the quality of the information presented on the site.

Upvotes are never simply upvotes: they are expressions of assent and declarations of truth as well.

Karmic Cascades

The idea that the hivemind has access to truth is clearly irrational, of course, but it does not mean that informational cascade theory, with its assumption of rationality, does not apply; rather, it means that it must be twisted into, formalized as, a theory of karmic cascades. *This* theory begins from Redditors' self-perception: in general, Redditors pride themselves on their rationality and see themselves as rational beings. The highly popular /r/atheism subreddit, for instance, boasted over 690,000 subscribers in April 2012 who would all, I have no doubt, describe themselves as rational. Voting others up to signal correctness increases this sensation of rationality: when I upvote a popular comment, I feel like I am doing something that has been sanctioned by many other rational people. I emphasize: I *feel* like I am rational. Karmic cascades unconsciously reinforce my sometimes-conscious assumption of rationality. And agreeing with the crowd, which reinforces my feeling of rationality, does not generally require a detailed consideration of the information at hand, as informational cascade theory notes.

Falling into a karmic cascade generates the unconscious sensation of correctness. Disagreeing with the crowd, however, and trying to break the cascade, is difficult (in no small part because people generally see only the final karma score rather than individual up- and down-votes); it requires much more consideration. Effort is required in order to achieve the sensation of being in the wrong, or being irrational – of being out of step with

the hivemind. It is, in other words, easier to fit oneself into what the community expects than to stand out from it. The peer pressure exerted here is similar to that exerted in real life, but it is arguably more effective because of the ease and frequency of access.

Continuous voting provides the opportunity for me to agree with other Redditors over and over again. I have many more opportunities to be a follower here than I do in the real world. This is apparent in both the structure of the comments and the popularity of particular subreddits; /r/AskReddit,³⁵² for example, has over 1.5 million subscribers, placing it in the top five.

The supposition and reinforcement of rationality by way of the karma system is the first notable consequence of the theory of karmic cascades. The second feature might be called *creep*. I alluded to this feature earlier when I mentioned the similar voting and ranking systems increasingly found across the web. Collectively, these systems are increasing the scope of the things to which a cascade theory of any sort might apply. The internet, that is, is presenting us with more and more binary choices. The choices apparent on Reddit are exemplary of this creep because we continually and repeatedly make them. Where I might like something on Facebook and then move on, on Reddit, I vote on one thing and then another and another. I can do this all day. If I feel like soliciting opinion, I can post something to Facebook and wait to see my friends interact with it. This is, however, less rewarding than doing the same on Reddit because I do not in fact have that many friends, much less that many friends interested in liking or commenting on my wall posts, and because those that choose to like or comment are not an anonymous mass that holds a collective, democratic, rational *truth*: they are my

³⁵² Frequenters of /r/AskReddit request and offer advice on a wide variety of questions.

friends, and they are therefore suspect. The judgment of the hivemind, however, can be trusted.

As an economic theory, the theory of informational cascades is concerned with optimization, which is to say with crafting systems in which it is difficult for cascades to form or easy for them to be broken. An economist interested in informational cascades and social media might look at the karma system, for instance, and suggest that Reddit could learn a lot from Slashdot, where users can moderate comments according to different attributes (as “insightful”, for instance, or as “funny”) rather than a simple up/down mechanic. This would still institute binaries – something is or is not insightful – but it would at least institute more of them, giving readers more options. These additional options would generate additional perspectives on existing cascades, which might result in escapes from their problematic logic. This would be a sort of epistemological politics: more options would mean more opportunity for critical thought. Ivo Welch suggests something along these lines when he argues that entrepreneurs who ignore the effects of a cascade and instead go their own way “help overturn cascades, and are thus extremely socially valuable”.³⁵³

But I am not particularly interested in “fixing” Reddit’s voting system. The difference between Welch’s concern and mine is the following: where he implies that politics necessarily happen within binary choices because binary choices are ubiquitous,³⁵⁴ I would suggest that the political action to take when confronted by a group

³⁵³ John Tierney, “How the Low-Fat, Low-Fact Cascade Just Keeps Rolling Along,” *TierneyLab*, October 9, 2007, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://tierneylab.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/10/09/how-the-low-fat-low-fact-cascade-just-keeps-rolling-along/>.

³⁵⁴ On Tierney’s blog, Welch notes that informational cascade theory works so well because many of the choices that we face are binary: “Endorsing a diet or not endorsing it. Buying a gizmo or not buying it. Going to the restaurant here or not. Running from the lion or not. Chasing the blond girl at the bar or not.”

of the blind following the blind is instead to call the system itself – the binaric system that has produced the conditions for that cascade in the first place – into question. In the case of karma, this means first thinking about the role played by the medium. How is it that karma rigidifies into something that seems to be more than just epistemological? In what sense does the karma system – the ontical structure under discussion – become ontological, or produce ontological effects? How does it contribute to *Ge-stell* and to virtual boredom? The theory of karmic cascades helps to answer these questions by highlighting the psychological means by which the ontical becomes ontological, or by which the karma system resolves uncertainty. The next section advances that argument further, examining some of the more memorable events from the last few years of Reddit’s history in order to clarify the connection between the psychological and the ontological.

5.3: The Faith of the Hivemind

People believe in nothing. There is nothing to believe in now... There’s this vacuum... what people have most longed for, which is the consumer society, has come to pass. Like all dreams that come to pass, there is a nagging sense of emptiness. So they look for anything, they believe in any extreme. Any extremist nonsense is better than nothing... Well, I think we’re on the track to all kinds of craziness. I think there is no end to what sort of nonsense will come out of the woodwork, and a lot of very dangerous nonsense. I could sum up the future in one word, and that word is boring. The future is going to be boring.

— J. G. Ballard quoted in Lars Svendsen, *A Philosophy of Boredom*

One cannot half-endorse a strict diet, buy $\frac{3}{4}$ of a gizmo, or vote a little for one candidate and a little for another. The informational cascade theory applies to these cases.

The idea that atheism is a theism seems, on its own, like idle talk, but the idea bears a fair degree of explanatory weight on /r/atheism and beyond. In this section, I will point to a number of instances where the particular “theism” characteristic of Reddit comes to the fore. Each of these instances exhibits an unconscious faith in the community – one that ends up suddenly dashed or slowly forgotten. By reading them through Nietzsche’s analysis of the formation of nihilism, I will argue that Redditors are gradually losing their faith, and that the reaction to this loss takes the form of a pendulum swing back from apostasy to the enthusiastic, even desperate, reinstatement of faith – albeit in a different form, or with a different object.

Thinking Long

The first instance of faith in the community that I would like to examine dates to December 7th, 2009, when one of the top posts on Reddit was titled “How do I tell my family/friends that I’m going to be dead soon?”³⁵⁵ In it, the submitter, writing under a throwaway account called “thinkinglong”, told the community that she had recently visited a doctor complaining of persistent stomach pain, and been referred to the local hospital for a full diagnosis. She was then informed that she had a cancerous tumour in her liver, and that she had only weeks to live. She had not yet told her family or friends because she did not know how to approach them. She turned to /r/AskReddit for advice.

³⁵⁵ thinkinglong, “How Do I Tell My Family/Friends That I’m Going to Be Dead Soon?” Reddit, accessed May 2, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/abwxc/how_do_i_tell_my_familyfriends_that_im_going_to/

The top comments in the post were incredibly kind, and throughout, there was an air of wonder at the generosity of the community paired with the practical concern for detail and implementation.³⁵⁶ When I first came across the post in the morning, I was touched by the generosity of the userbase. There was no denying the positive intentions of the people posting to the thread, or of the users who voted the comment so highly. But I also was not entirely surprised. I have grown accustomed to seeing requests for help or advice that are met with a large degree of (at least professed) generosity. Often, these posts bear fruit. Soapier, for instance, is a small soap company that owes its 2009 profitability in very large part to Reddit: when the company, beset by the economic downturn, began to go under, stilesjp, the son of Soapier's owner, created a post asking for Reddit's advice and offering a 25% discount to Reddit users.³⁵⁷ The community responded by buying more soap in two days than the company had sold before in their best month.³⁵⁸ Soapier continues to do brisk trade with the Reddit community, offering

³⁵⁶ In the first thread, complete strangers divulged information about their blood types, and offered to donate part of their liver if it could help. Poster umami (blood type: AB+) garnered over 1400 karma points with his initial offer; johndavis730 (blood type: O-) responded, collecting over 680. In the next thread, Leighsah picked up about 500 points by telling a long, detailed story about her own horrible experiences with cancer. Having survived a supposedly fatal form of breast cancer, she offered hopeful advice: "Ignore the prognosis. Ignore the prognosis. Did you hear what I said? Ignore the prognosis. Doctors PRACTICE the ART of medicine." She then touched on a dozen or so aspects of the treatment and recovery process. A medical doctor's post followed, asking about the possibility of cyroablation, chemotherapy, clinical trials, and transplant. Poster carotids picked up around 700 karma points. Responding to the liver transfer offers, mrmoney said, simply, "This is why reddit rules." AnotherEcho wrote, "You are all beautiful human beings. I love Reddit." willis77 was more sober, noting that a transplant would cost around half a million dollars (which would be far out of reach for the insurance-less original submitter); however, crusoe suggested that the userbase could set up a trust built out of donations, hopefully collecting enough to meet the costs of the operation, and agpc, a lawyer, volunteered to "administer the trust free of charge" – and "[w]hatever happens, I will ask my grandmother and her religious group to pray for you. I don't personally believe in God, but you never know!"

³⁵⁷ stilesjp, "Hi Reddit... I Need Some Help," Reddit, accessed May 2, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/r/reddit.com/comments/8s267/hi_reddit_i_need_some_help/c0a8xn4.

³⁵⁸ stilesjp, "A Thank You from Soapier to Reddit," Reddit, accessed May 2, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/r/reddit.com/comments/8sepg/a_thank_you_from_soapier_to_reddit/c0aa5sg.

Reddit-specific soaps shaped like the alien mascot and the orange-red message envelope, and smelling of bacon – Reddit’s favourite scent.

In a non-commercial vein, when Haiti was struck by a devastating earthquake at the beginning of 2010, Redditors began donating money to major charities like the Red Cross. After some discussion, the community decided that Direct Relief International would be a better recipient than the Red Cross,³⁵⁹ and the administrators challenged the community to raise \$31,415 for DRI, pledging \$1000 themselves.³⁶⁰ After reaching that goal within five hours, they doubled it, and the community again met the target immediately. A new target – \$185,229.69, which was greater than the amount spent during Reddit’s annual international Secret Santa that year – was set and eventually met.³⁶¹

Individual users sometimes elicit similar sympathy. P-Dub, for instance, is a popular Redditor who submitted a post titled “I have a problem, and I don’t know what I can do about it” in December 2009 to /r/AskReddit.³⁶² His mother, he said, had just been unjustly suspended from her job as a high school art teacher, and he didn’t know what to

³⁵⁹ lowtone94, “Please Go To www.redcross.org and Donate At Least \$10 to Help Out the People of Haiti. I Know the Reddit Community Can Make a Difference!” Reddit, accessed May 2, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/r/worldnews/comments/ap5kz/please_go_to_wwwredcrossorg_and_donate_at_least/.

³⁶⁰ Alexis Ohanian, “Helping Haiti (Because We Ought to Do More than Just Change Our Logo),” Reddit Blog, January 14, 2010, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://blog.reddit.com/2010/01/helping-haiti-because-we-ought-to-do.html>.

³⁶¹ “Reddit,” Direct Relief International, accessed April 6, 2011, http://dri.convio.net/site/TR/Events/Tributes?pg=fund&fr_id=1030&pxfid=1511&JServSessionIdr004=r7t58phav1.app245b. Although this is an impressive number, Redditors raised even more for Donors Choose, a philanthropic organization favoured by Stephen Colbert, in order to catch Colbert’s attention in advance of the fall 2010 Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear: over 11,000 Redditors and Colbert fans donated over \$600,000 dollars to the organization (see “Donate to a Project in Support of Restoring Truthiness Giving Page,” Donors Choose, accessed April 6, 2011, <http://www.donorschoose.org/donors/viewChallenge.html?id=39361>).

³⁶² P-Dub, “I Have a Problem, and I Don’t Know What I Can Do About It,” Reddit, accessed May 2, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/ag96s/i_have_a_problem_and_i_dont_know_what_i_can_do/.

do. He wanted advice, but the Reddit community responded by offering money.

Although initially reluctant, he soon set up a PayPal account and collected over \$7000 in donations from over 500 Redditors.

My favourite example of Reddit's generosity, however, is strictly non-monetary. It comes from only two days before the outpouring of sympathy over thinkinglong's post. A Redditor named elmstreeter, whose mother had died the day before, requested that someone Photoshop the last picture taken of the two of them together to remove an oxygen tube from her face.³⁶³ A Redditor named wahoob responded immediately:



Figure 3: Before and After³⁶⁴

(The photos, incidentally, were uploaded to imgur, which is an image hosting website created by Alan Schaaf, a Redditor, for the Reddit community.)³⁶⁵

³⁶³ elmstreeter, "Help Me Fix My Last Picture of My Mom," Reddit, accessed May 2, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/comments/abam0/help_me_fix_my_last_picture_of_mom/.

³⁶⁴ Ibid.

All of this is to say that I was accustomed to Reddit's goodwill, and that when I read thinkinglong's post, I thought that she would, at the least, find some solace in the outpouring of (literally) positive karma, even despite the incredible hardship that she was enduring. This made it all the more surprising when I found out that thinkinglong's story had been completely fabricated in order to deceive the community, collect upvotes, and illustrate Redditors' gullibility:

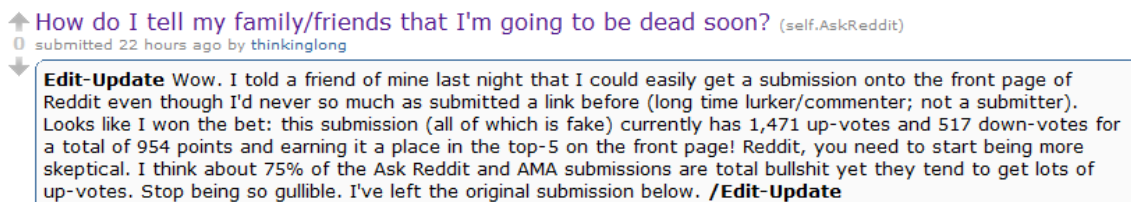


Figure 4: I'm Going to Be Dead Soon³⁶⁶

Now, I say that this was surprising for me, and it was: the initial post seemed honest and legitimate, and I approached it from a trusting frame of mind. This probably has something to do with wahoorob's beautiful, touching work of two days prior. I was not ready for thinkinglong's deception. That said, I was not entirely shocked, either. This is the internet, after all; the performance of identity, even a malicious performance, is part and parcel of the medium.

...Right?

We are forgetting the lessons of the 1990s. As the internet has lost its novelty, becoming insinuated in our daily routines, we have started to assume, unconsciously, that

³⁶⁵ MrGrim, "My Gift to Reddit: I Created an Image Hosting Service That Doesn't Suck. What Do You Think?" Reddit, accessed April 6, 2011, http://www.reddit.com/r/reddit.com/comments/7zlyd/my_gift_to_reddit_i_created_an_image_hosting/.

³⁶⁶ thinkinglong, "How Do I Tell My Family/Friends That I'm Going to Be Dead Soon?"

pseudonyms correspond with real names, or that the stories that we tell one another on the internet are true. We may talk knowingly about how sceptical we are, but when it comes down to it, we believe that the person on the other end of the computer (it is a *person* on the other end of the computer, right?) is trying to make contact, just like we are. We want to believe that they are honest and real, because if we cannot, it becomes difficult to navigate the net. But the concern is more than just logistical: without the assumption of identity, it becomes difficult for us to take the net, or anything else, as a *world that can* be navigated. Pseudonymity, when experienced as an unwelcome loss of subjectivity rather than as deliberate identity play, can challenge the internal coherence, and even the foundational character, of the world.

Our hopes and beliefs are sometimes dashed, and when this happens, we tend not to respond very well. This is exactly what took place following thinkinglong's announcement. Saydrah,³⁶⁷ an official moderator for the subreddit in which the original post appeared, captured the angry but still hopeful spirit of the crowd nicely:

Congrats, you're a douchebag attempting to extinguish the community spirit that makes this one of the last great places on the Internet. And you're also banned from AskReddit.

EDIT: After discussion with community members and HueyPriest, I've unbanned the thread--the poster is still banned as will be any alt accounts he makes to troll further. MMM made the good point that the advice in this thread is great regardless of the troll's intentions, and Huey pointed out that deleting it is kind of troll-feeding.

Apologies to any real cancer sufferers or people losing loved ones to cancer who are offended by the troll's taunting message at the top of the thread. I wish everyone out there who really did have cancer would experience this outpouring of support instead. This thread stands as a testimony to Reddit's

³⁶⁷ In another ironic twist, Saydrah, the moderator and crusader for the community spirit, was exiled from Reddit a few months later when users found out that she had been working for a social media firm, using her moderator status on Reddit to propagate its work. Redditors felt betrayed at this conflict of interest, and insisted that the administrators ban her account. They did so.

willingness to help someone in need first and ask questions later – that’s not gullibility, that’s humanity, and it’s a trait worth preserving.³⁶⁸

Saydrah’s post collected a number of resonant responses, like this one from armper, which highlighted Reddit’s “community spirit”: “He hasn’t extinguished my spirit. Even though the original post is a troll (and fuck you OP, very distasteful way of trying to prove a ‘point’) I still enjoyed reading the comments here. (Enjoyed as in felt closer to the Reddit community).” The response from kimberlygoly emphasized the anger that thinkinglong had generated: “When is it ever okay to lie about cancer?!?all to get on the front page of reddit?!? I fucking hope karma is a real thing and there is some kind of painful anal disease in your future, you complete waste of space.”

What can all of this tell us about the psycho-ontology of pseudonymity? One of Nietzsche’s brief but apt accounts of the abandonment of belief from *The Will to Power* demonstrates how this apostasy maps onto the extinguishment of community spirit described, and disavowed, by Saydrah. Although thinkinglong’s post does not represent the consummation of nihilism – it is extraordinarily unlikely that this post was the straw that broke any single Redditor’s back – it does help illustrate the process of losing faith. Extrapolating from this example will allow me to demonstrate that pseudonymity leads to nihilism as surely as the identity of Facebook leads to the endless pursuit of convenience, and that Redditors, for all their positive intentions, cannot write “community” into Reddit’s structure to the extent that they would like, since community and structure, as beliefs, will succumb to the rising tide of nihilism.

³⁶⁸ thinkinglong, “How Do I Tell My Family and Friends.”

Nihilism and Extremity

The notes assembled in *The Will to Power*, like the ideas in Nietzsche's thought as a whole, are infrequently systematic, but they occasionally come together in sustained, argumentative form. "The Decline of Cosmological Values", written just after *On the Genealogy of Morals*, presents just this sort of argument. I make central reference to the "Decline" in what follows, branching into other notes from *The Will to Power* and related texts later on.

The "Decline" is divided into two sections. In the first, Nietzsche inquires into the conditions that must be reached for nihilism to be achieved. He identifies three, discussing the first in terms of aimlessness: we have sought meaning in everything but have discovered that meaning – that toward which we had aimed – does not exist. The things of the world mean less than we thought that they did, or are meaningless altogether. Nihilism in this sense includes not only the bare realization of meaninglessness, but a reflection upon that realization as well: we understand that we have been wasting our time and expending energies needlessly, and we are embarrassed and disappointed. We have, for instance, been reaching toward some state of fulfillment or happiness, looking for meaning in politics or community or religion, but we find that it is not there. We had an aim for ourselves, but that aim is revealed to be arbitrary, constructed, or false.³⁶⁹

Redditors begin from something similar to this assumption of meaninglessness, often repeating phrases like "You are not special" and "The world owes you nothing".

³⁶⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1968), 12.

They agree with Nietzsche's description of aimlessness above, and are, in this sense, nihilists. But just how "nihilistic" are they? Are they disappointed or embarrassed? And does their skepticism about meaning extend to everything, or only to the formal, grand narratives associated with modernity? Redditors scorn theism and ideology, but they often proselytize as atheists or betray genuine hope in new political movements and genuine dismay when those movements become co-opted. Redditors know that they are *supposed* to be skeptics, but they – we – find it difficult to maintain this skeptical air at every turn. We are certainly disappointed when our appointed champions fail us – the evidence from thinkinglong, and from another example to which I will turn shortly, demonstrates this – but whether we are embarrassed with ourselves for misplacing our faith, or for placing any faith at all, is more difficult to determine from comments alone. Still, the insincerity or imperfection of Redditors' skepticism is apparent in their faith in the correspondence of username to identity. Redditors do not seek meaning in the pseudonym, exactly, but they do seek it in the compelling stories that are presented under the sign of the pseudonym and in the feeling of community or interpersonal connection that is the consequence of that initial investment of attention. Redditors are not only interested in having the best of the net presented to them; they do not come to the site because of the clever mechanism of karma alone. The community is tremendously important, and it only operates as well as it does because of this prior faith in the meaningful correspondence of username to identity. In the case of thinkinglong, if this meaning had held up, something (like helping another person and feeling good about that aid) could have been "*achieved* through the process – [but] now one realizes that

becoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing*".³⁷⁰ thinkinglong lied, and lied about something of foundational importance. We know that others lie, too; we know that we do it sometimes as well. The betrayal of thinkinglong elicited the extreme reactions that it did not only because it temporarily spoiled the positive, genuine feelings generated by this particular thread, but also because it pointed to the ease with which foundations are shattered.

At a loss, lacking the meaning that was once provided by grand narratives, one posits "a totality, a systematization, indeed any organization in all events, and underneath all events, and a soul that longs to admire and revere"; and "if the soul be that of a logician, complete consistency and real dialectic are quite sufficient to reconcile it to everything". This failed search for unity is the second condition of nihilism. The new nihilist searches for meaning outside, in "some whole that is infinitely superior to him". He looks for universal value, but he does more than that, too: he "conceives" this value, or constructs it himself. The nihilist searches for and constructs meaning-giving wholes in order to escape the new pain of meaninglessness. Additionally, though, he does this "in order to be able to believe in his own value". There is the worry, at this point, that it is not only the world that lacks meaning; the nihilist may lack meaning himself.³⁷¹

The Redditor's soul is like that of the logician that Nietzsche describes: the Redditor has regular recourse to logic and clear causal explanations. These suffice to give him not meaning, but clarity of place – a purpose, at least, that makes sense in a broader logical context, even if that sense is not "meaningful" in the way that it was during the reign of organized religion. Furthermore, the values to which the Redditor

³⁷⁰ Ibid.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

appeals and that he helps to construct – values like reason, democracy, community, and identity – have the very solid appearance of universality. It is effectively impossible for most of us to argue with the precepts of mathematics or logic, and it is simple to deny the validity of another’s arguments by pointing to their irrationality. But these universal, transcendental, natural values may not be absolute. If they were, then it would be true that the Redditor could “reconcile” himself with the world, even in a state of partial meaninglessness. Unfortunately, the particularity, immanence, and artificiality of these values makes itself known every now and then, despite the supportive structure of the karma system (which renders outliers unpopular).³⁷² Why do so many people deny the common sense of Richard Dawkins, or Ray Kurzweil, or Ron Paul (to take three unrelated figures popular on the site)? Why do dictators cling to power even today, and why do people elect forms of government, even after the dictators abdicate their thrones, that do not accord with democratic values as we understand them? More pressingly: why do people try to hurt the Reddit community? Why would they lie about something as serious, something as painful and present, as cancer? What is *wrong* with people? The easiest answer, and the answer at which the vast majority of Redditors arrived in the case of thinkinglong, is that these people are trolls. They are not like us, and they can and should be ignored. This works, as a response, on a case by case basis: downvote the troll and it goes away. But each instance of trolling presents us with a tiny jolt. When enough of them accumulate, or when one particular instance stands out as especially egregious (and I would argue that the thinkinglong thread counts as one such instance), they can force us into a reconsideration of some of these transcendental values. This sort of thing

³⁷² Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002) follows a similar argumentative structure in its discussion of Kant’s first critique.

can hurt our self perception, too: I might make a comment that I think falls within the terms of common sense, but it might be rejected by the Reddit community. Whatever the cause, these sorts of events can lead to the kinds of doubt about the world that motivated Descartes to reconsider its actuality: they are the straight stick appearing bent in the glass of water, and the trolls are the deceiving demons.

So we now have three losses: the loss of value in the world as such, the loss of value in the constructed world, and the concomitant loss of value in the nihilist. As losses accumulate, it becomes difficult to find recourse to stable sources of meaning that once staved off the third condition for the rise of nihilism: the loss of faith in being itself. If this might be false and that might be false and even my body might be false, Descartes asks, then what can be said to be true? If God is dead and the Democrats are corrupt and science lurches from paradigm to paradigm and *thinkinglong did not have cancer*, then what is there to find faith in? Should we try to just stop caring entirely? We renounce the world itself: “the last form of nihilism... includes disbelief in any metaphysical world and forbids itself any belief in a *true* world. Having reached this standpoint, one grants the reality of becoming as the *only* reality... but *cannot endure this world though one does not want to deny it*”. The consummate nihilist passes judgment on the next world and on this, but has nowhere to go and nothing to do.³⁷³

We react to thinkinglong at first with shock or disbelief, and then with anger, and then with what Nietzsche is talking about here: we imagine a world in which she *did not lie*. We construct a world above where we remember the positive outpouring rather than the betrayal. This is the world to which Saydrah and the others made their appeal:

³⁷³ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 13.

remember the empathy and humanity of the response and forget the malice of the truth. The Redditors that agreed with Saydrah here are not, then, consummate nihilists, since they pass judgment on becoming while holding being in reserve. They remain modern. In another sense, though, they might be counted among the consummate nihilists that Nietzsche describes, since they know that the world of their desire has been “fabricated solely from psychological needs”, and that it is shown to be false with great regularity.³⁷⁴

Nietzsche’s conclusion to the first section is the following: “the categories ‘aim,’ ‘unity,’ ‘being’ which we used to project some value into the world – we *pull out* again; so the world looks *valueless*.” In the second section, he responds to this devaluation. Why did we have faith in these three particular categories in the first place? Why did we need ends, systems, and absolute worlds? Rather than answering this directly, he suggests that we work towards an answer by exploring alternatives:

Let us try if it is not possible to give up our faith in [the categories of reason]. Once we have devaluated these three categories, the demonstration that they cannot be applied to the universe is no longer any reason for devaluating the universe.

Conclusion: The faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism. We have measured the world according to categories *that refer to a purely fictitious world*.³⁷⁵

³⁷⁴ I could point to many different examples of this world fabrication from the last few years of Reddit’s history, but I will highlight only the most egregious. In April 2011, the administrators told the moderators of the popular “Ask Me Anything” subreddit that several of the AMAs therein had been written from the same IP address, and therefore probably by the same person. One of the subreddit’s moderators, flyryan, notified the community in a thread titled “Massive Troll Bust” (Reddit, accessed May 2, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/r/IAMa/comments/gwp4k/massive_troll_bust/), providing links to the false AMAs. Included were two threads that had collected over 5000 comments between them, and another thread featuring a deaf woman (who flirted, popularly, with the deaf man, trading pictures with him on his thread), among 16 other less popular submissions. The most popular responses to flyryan’s notification were humorous, but many others were disappointed or angry. Redditor menomenaa, for instance, found herself surprised: “I’m having a stronger reaction than I thought I would to those people not being real. Why do I feel betrayed by anonymous strangers on the internet?”

³⁷⁵ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 13.

We should give up our faith in the categories of reason. We have done that, partially: we are a culture that tries to separate church from state, bureaucracy from politics, impersonal from personal, objective from subjective. We know that the notion of final causes is absurd, since the only reasonable form of causation is efficient, and that teleology leads to the worst kinds of fanatical excesses. We know also that our institutions are flawed, but we have technocratic means by which we are improving them. Above all, we know that there is no point in discussing ontology or metaphysics: those methods of inquiry and the assumptions about “being” on which they were based fell by the wayside long ago. Science needs no ontological foundations.

Still, the idea that we might be able to abandon the categories of reason or faith remains a question for Nietzsche; it is not clear that we have moved past this “transitional stage”. This is particularly clear from the “final conclusion” to the “Decline” where he goes on to say that all of the categories of reason

are, psychologically considered, the results of certain perspectives of utility, designed to maintain and increase human constructs of domination – and they have been falsely *projected* in the essence of things. What we find here is still the *hyperbolic naiveté* of man: positing himself as the meaning and measure of the value of things.³⁷⁶

This returns us with crystal clarity to *Ge-stell*. We think about the world in terms of its use value. We want to control the world, use the world, because we – each of us individually – are the most important thing in it. However, this perspective does not lead to domination and control, or to placing ourselves on the throne of utility, but to the devaluation of everything, including ourselves. Furthermore, this perspective, as

³⁷⁶ Ibid, 14.

extended and extreme as it is, becomes an ontological phenomenon, writing itself into the essence of things. Buried there, it is difficult to uproot.

So while Nietzsche might seem to be offering a way “out” – just give up your faith in these old ideas and you will free yourself from the burden of nihilism and for the objectivity of science – he is in fact pointing out the incredible difficulty, maybe impossibility, of moving to the outside. The problem is that the categories of reason are not simply perspectives or ideologies that one can assume one day and cast off the next; rather, they are written into the psychological, institutional, and mnemotechnical structures of our lives in an ontological fashion. (Nietzsche makes the extent of their reach clear in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where he demonstrates the dependency of art, philosophy, religion, science, and even atheism on the ascetic ideal.) Worse: as psychological phenomena, the ideals of “reason” or “faith”, long repressed, inevitably return. Nietzsche comments on this pendulum swing throughout *The Will to Power*, noting it first in one of his sketches of an outline for a larger text: when we renounce our faith (in God), we “rebound from ‘God is truth’ to the fanatical faith ‘All is false’”. After the sudden renunciation of faith, we swing too from morality to cynicism or skepticism, i.e. the belief that “[e]verything lacks meaning’ (the untenability of one interpretation of the world, upon which a tremendous amount of energy has been lavished, awakens the suspicion that *all* interpretations of the world are false)”.³⁷⁷ With the death of God, there is no longer any absolute (external) foundation for morals. We clung to these earlier morals with such fierceness because we invested them with too much meaning; in their absence, we wonder if meaning remains in anything. This initial skepticism is decisive

³⁷⁷ Ibid, 7.

because it leads to all future skepticisms, and to the whole cycle of swinging from skepticism to faith in a newfound object and then back to skepticism.

Nietzsche connects the “critical tension” between “extremes”³⁷⁸ to the transitional nihilism of modernity.³⁷⁹ This nihilism is “incomplete” in the sense that we generally have not renounced all values, let alone found everything that is without value and everything that might be impossible. Living “in the midst of” this incomplete nihilism, we become partly aware of it and unsettled by it. We therefore attempt to escape – but we do this by making an appeal to alternative categories of reason or faith that remain within the sway of an old metaphysics. When we attempt this escape from nihilism “without revaluating our values so far”, we “produce the opposite [values], make the problem more acute”.³⁸⁰ Our “awareness” of nihilism, partial and reactive as it is, does not help us to escape from this swing between extremes. It is no surprise that we find escape so difficult: the ascetic ideal that Nietzsche identifies as the root cause of nihilism goes back 2000 years. When we try to cast it off, “[a]bruptly we plunge into the opposite valuations, with all the energy that such an extreme overvaluation of man has generated in man”.³⁸¹ This should not suggest to us that have accomplished something, like successfully moving beyond God: “Extreme positions are not succeeded by moderate ones but by extreme positions of the opposite kind. Thus the belief in the absolute

³⁷⁸ Ibid, 11.

³⁷⁹ Thiele, commenting on Kuhn and Fyodor Dostoevsky, also notes this movement between extremities, connecting the phenomenon with (post)modernity and boredom and labelling it a “psychic bulimia” wherein the sufferer of boredom alternates between complete idleness and a desperate action that tries to alleviate this idleness (“Postmodernization and the Routinization of Novelty,” 493).

³⁸⁰ Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, 19-20.

³⁸¹ Ibid, 20-21.

immorality of nature... is the psychologically necessary affect once the belief in God and an essentially moral order becomes untenable”.³⁸²

Reddit frequently presents evidence of such extreme reactions. Take Saydrah’s initial reaction to the thinkinglong incident, for instance: ban the offender, call him a douchebag, and close the thread. The commenters reacted in the same way, either with anger (kimbergoly) or a staunch defence of the threatened position (armper); they were offended, personally, by thinkinglong’s deception. If Nietzsche’s analysis above applies in this case, they felt so offended because they hold the Reddit community in the same esteem with which we once held the Church. The Reddit community exemplifies the best of humanity; it is a place where our faith can be preserved. Since threatening the community means threatening a new ideal of faith or reason, an intense emotional reaction would seem to follow.

Ambiguity über Alles

The thinkinglong incident demonstrates how Redditors react to overt trolls. A more recent thread illustrates a different set of reactions, but a set that ties into the *uncertainty* of faith that Nietzsche associates with nihilism. In early March, 2011, Lucidending wrote the following post, titled “51 Hours Left to Live”,³⁸³ in the popular /r/IAmA³⁸⁴ subreddit:

³⁸² Ibid, 35.

³⁸³ Lucidending, “51 Hours Left to Live,” Reddit, accessed March 9, 2011, http://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/fy6yz/51_hours_left_to_live/.

³⁸⁴ The IAmA subreddit – “I am a _____, ask me anything” – is one of the youngest and most popular. Conceived by Redditors rather than by administrators, the subreddit features informal interviews with

On Tuesday I'll finally end my battle with cancer thanks to Oregon's Death with dignity act. As part of my preparations I've ended my pain medication and am trying to regain what little dignity and clarity I can.

Who I was doesn't matter. I'm in pain, I'm tired and I'm finally being granted a small shred of respect. Feel free to AMA if you're so inclined.

The post elicited an enormous response: thousands replied while Lucidending actively took questions, and thousands more added their thoughts and feelings afterward.³⁸⁵ By the end of its time in the sun, the thread had collected around 33,000 votes and 9,600 comments that came together in a profound and moving expression not only of the best of the net, but of the best of humanity.

It was, of course, impossible to verify Lucidending's story. After posting for a short period, he apparently logged out of the account – a throwaway – and lost his password. He wrote to the moderators of the subreddit, thanking the community “for the best hour I had in 2011”; the administrators of Reddit as a whole did what they could to restore the password, but Lucidending did not return.³⁸⁶ Based on the emotional, sympathetic character of the 500 immediately visible comments, there was no desire to investigate further.

people of various occupations and different degrees of notoriety, from the mundane (a waiter in a nice restaurant, a software engineer) to the extraordinary (Ken Jennings, Stephen Colbert).

³⁸⁵ Expressions of emotion were common: “You have me crying my eyes out here”; “No onions crap, this post made me cry”; “Almost two years on Reddit, and this is the first post that has ever made me truly cry”. Some conveyed affection: “I don't want to ask you anything. I just want to give you a hug”; “Whoever you are, you just put my life into perspective. Thanks for that. I love you”. Many talked about the experiences of loved ones' fights with cancer. Others claimed inspiration: “You have just inspired me to tell my significant other that I'm in love with her”; “I wrote a song because of the feeling of peace and benevolence that you have given to me”; “I'm going for a walk. The snow is falling lightly and the air is perfect. I ain't wasting it”. A Redditor named EdgatheFish made a Google Map in response to one of Lucidending's comments about going on a virtual world tour; others tried to immortalize some of his comments, writing them on whiteboards and balloons (one Redditor uploading a YouTube video of said balloon shooting into the sky).

³⁸⁶ The irony of the situation was not lost on the user base: thebearjuden wrote that “[o]ne day all of us will lose our passwords”, and was reward with nearly 900 karma points.

But there was a small problem: Lucidending may have been a fake. *The Oregonian* reported on the outpouring of emotion on Reddit, and noted some discrepancies in Lucidending's account. "When asked about the details of a lethal prescription, Lucidending indicated he would take the drug intravenously, which is not allowed under the Oregon law".³⁸⁷ Reddit quickly took note of the article, with one Redditor titling the link "I'm Sorry Guys".³⁸⁸ The overall tenor of the 1100 responses in the thread was not nearly as outraged as I had been expecting based on my memory of thinking long; instead, many Redditors pointed out that the story in the *Oregonian* failed to disprove Lucidending's account, and argued that the significance of the original thread lay in the way that the community came together to collectively grieve rather than in the question of truth. Callie88's comment was emblematic. Asked if he would respond differently to the next person making the same kind of claim – if the trolls had cried wolf one too many times – he said this:

Nope, not me. Next one I read I hope I have the same reaction. What did it cost me? A minute to wish them well, to say I'm sorry you are going thru that? Nope, no troll is gonna rob me of that from myself.

You should fight cynicism to the death. A small dose of skepticism, perhaps. But no, I don't want to be cynical.

And I'm not a doe-eyed teenager, who doesn't know better. I'm 46, and I hope I am the same at 96. I've been thru enough shit, enough bitterness, enough bullshit – but you know what? It takes just as much energy to be positive as negative, and when in doubt, trust your gut, and just be kind. It's the least I can do on this planet.³⁸⁹

Callie88 was avowing the faith in humanity that had been put on display over the weekend, refusing to yield ground in the face of a possible untruth; he was defending it

³⁸⁷ Joe Rojas-Burke, "Oregon's Death with Dignity Act Post Stirs Worldwide Sympathy on Reddit.com," *Oregon Live*, March 7, 2011, accessed April 6, 2011, http://www.oregonlive.com/health/index.ssf/2011/03/post_45.html.

³⁸⁸ doug3465, "I'm Sorry Guys," Reddit, accessed May 2, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/fzh3w/im_sorry_guys/.

³⁸⁹ Ibid.

with an appeal to something ephemeral and indefinite but nevertheless robust. Still, his response represented only one pole of two reactions: the other, and the one that I had been expecting, was outrage. With a few exceptions, this opposite reaction did not materialize. While this might seem to contravene the foregoing analysis of the formation of nihilism, it actually does something different: it illustrates the possibly non-polarized reactions prompted by ambiguity. *The Oregonian* suggested only that Lucidending's story might have been fake; the author drew no final conclusion, and the net came to none. Because the truth of the post was uncertain, it did not force a particular (interpretation of the) world on Reddit's readers. Redditors were left to consider, if they were so inclined, the limited evidence before them, and to choose which world they wanted to inhabit: where the definite truth of thinkinglong's reveal had made Redditors choose between anger and a patently naïve belief in a reality that never was, the ambivalence of Lucidending's story left Redditors to opt for one world over another with relative emotional freedom.

Redditors had many “non-polar” reactions to the possibility that Lucidending was a fake,³⁹⁰ but the most telling reaction came from outside the site. Adrian Chen, a

³⁹⁰ The scenario gave Reddit's skeptics a chance to come out of the woodwork and explain themselves. HyperspaceHero, for instance, made the following popular note:

No shit Lucidending was fake. The scenario was implausible: He had just over two days to live, so he decided to spend his time by making a Reddit account and telling complete strangers about his life. Then, he forgot his password after an hour. Any time I mentioned that this was probably bullshit, I was downvoted into oblivion for several reasons:

- * My view apparently didn't matter because I've trolled before.
- * “Who cares if it's real? He's brought us together!”
- * Although Reddit is composed primarily of atheists who reject all religions because they denounce the very notion of faith, they were totally content about accepting Lucidending at face value because the post was inspiring. The Bible probably has a few good bits in it, too, but we seem to scrutinize that.

I ended up deleting my posts questioning the authenticity of Lucidending. My guess is Lucidending was just some guy that wanted attention for his ideas on life, and he knew nobody

Gawker staff writer and occasional internet troll, played a small but important role in the drama. I am going to quote a large section of an explanatory post that he wrote on his blog after the events concerned, both because his synopsis of the event is concise and because his interpretation of Reddit as a whole is compelling:

I was skeptical about Lucidending from the beginning. His responses were cartoon versions a dying man's words, and he offered only the most clichéd details about his impending demise. I had done research on Oregon's Death with Dignity law in college, and everything about Lucidending's story was off.

Also, what terminally ill person would spend even one of his last hours answering questions on a message board? (And why Reddit, when 4chan would have come up way more interesting questions?) As Gizmodo staffer Sam Biddle put it "Spending my dying days answering questions on reddit is bleaker than death itself." Lucidending was a fraud, maybe a viral marketing campaign for a new AXE scent.

...

After reading that Lucidending was a fraud Monday night [on *The Oregonian*], I Tweeted "Reddit is so full of shit it makes my head hurt." The shit they are full of, specifically, is this cult of skepticism that pervades the site: Users love calling out other people for thoughtless belief, whether it's in religion, socialized medicine, or the veracity of their favorite unbelievable image. ("Photoshopped!" they cry.) And now they were the ones who stowed away rational thought aboard Lucidending's magical dream train.³⁹¹

This is the first part of what I find compelling about Chen's account: he correctly identifies Reddit's cult of skepticism for what it is, noting the inconsistency or even hypocrisy of Redditors' collective judgment. The relationship of his analysis to Nietzsche's (at least at its most cynical) becomes apparent as Chen continues:

I'd recently seen Reddit's fundamentalist skepticism first-hand while reporting on the story of Maya Gilsey, the college student who tried to raise money on Reddit for cancer and was hounded by angry users who thought she was a scammer. No matter what proof she offered – a local news story about her efforts, pictures,

would listen to him unless he was on the verge of death. You know, because that suddenly makes his ideas more profound. Yawn.

³⁹¹ Adrian Chen, "Why the Internet Thinks I Faked Having Cancer on a Message Board," *Gawker*, March 10, 2011, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://gawker.com/5780681/why-the-internet-thinks-i-faked-having-cancer-on-a-message-board>.

links – Redditors refused to believe her. And here was Lucidending, with his crazy tale and absolutely no proof, elevated to Reddit God.³⁹²

Reddit elevates ephemeral icons to godhood, and then places its collective faith *in their memory*. Their presence, or our ability to access them, is as unimportant as their truth. In fact, their presence might actually detract from their effectiveness as objects of faith: if these ephemeral icons were certain, we would not be able to *believe* in them.

So Redditors are not in fact looking for certainty or resolution, despite the earlier argument about karmic cascades. The karma system might make it seem like Redditors are objective scientists, and the way that Redditors describe themselves reinforces this, but the evidence here suggests otherwise: they are interested in *preserving* ambiguity, ambivalence, uncertainty, pseudonymity. The ambiguous founds the digital world; it is on the basis of the ambiguous that community is constructed. The ambiguous itself is not something to which we can gesture or in which we can place faith, but it provides the foundations for ephemeral icons like Lucidending. We place a semi-conscious faith in temporary pillars of the community and thereby in the community and thereby in the ambiguity that undergirds it all. And again, when the faith that we place in those first, most obvious objects of belief is called into question, we are forced to reckon with the instability of their foundations: because the identity of Lucidending is uncertain, identity in general might be as well, and so might be the structures that gave rise to identity in the first place, and so on.

³⁹² Chen concludes: “This was all running through my head when I posted that fateful tweet a few minutes later: ‘I have a confession to make: I was lucidending.’ It was a joke. The joke being that my claiming to be Lucidending was as believable as Lucidending’s claim to be a dying cancer patient. If I really wanted to out myself as lucidending, wouldn’t I just log into his account and post something?” (Ibid). His joke fell flat – Reddit vilified him – but it was at least well thought out.

Forced to reckon with these unstable foundations, what do we do? Do we invest our increasingly nomadic faith in something “certain”, sprinting to a new extreme? The evidence suggests otherwise. Increasingly, we look less for the certainty of extremity and more for simple, distracting drama. On the net, the nihilism that Nietzsche describes as the devaluation of all values manifests itself as the devaluation of *everything but* the distracting or the dramatic. The ambiguity born of profound boredom, which might call attention to our nihilism, must be avoided, so the objects of our emotional investment are now much smaller than they used to be: not God, but the internet; not science, but /r/science; not reason, but /r/AskReddit. We are not exactly faithless; it is just that we are now placing what is left of our faith in small, easily satisfied phenomena – clickable links – the “truth” of which is difficult to shatter. There is nothing more “certain” than the digital quotidian.

Should this worry us? Making ambiguity, ambivalence, uncertainty, and pseudonymity the metaphysical ground of the internet gives nihilism a new structure – one that necessarily involves the elevation of distraction. Because the distracting is such a small target for thought – precisely because it hides from thought – it is difficult to unsettle. This makes digital nihilism, which is the nihilism of our era, even more robust than its modern forebears – and this is, for all the reasons that Nietzsche explains in *The Will to Power*, cause for “worry”.

A Redditor named Default, responding to the possibility that Lucidending was a fake, thinks that the Lucidending story is cause for worry too, albeit for different reasons. He explains:

The circlejerk continues. Why do people keep saying this troll brought out the beauty of participating redditors, so it was still worthwhile? What I saw in that

thread was you chumps giving your a/s/l, photos of hand writing of supposedly immortal words on a white-boards (shamelessly missing the irony; and of course the repost in /r/pics so the ‘artist’ could reap delicious link karma), and self-congratulations at every glurgy post.

I know you guys are addicted to the internet and fear the real world, but the real world is where humans have coped and contemplated life and death for tens of thousands of years. Look at how you grasp at seeming interaction with someone suffering and facing death on the internet to claim a profound and personal experience. Does a stranger on the internet saying “good luck, see you on the other side” really represent the best in humanity? As you wallow in your self-satisfaction you will be distracted and miss out on the events in the real world that could have been the moments to shape your life. And there will be real life tragedies you cannot avoid, and you would be a fool to think you’re stronger facing them because you said ‘wassup from FL’ to troll that claimed to be dying.³⁹³

Default is not wrong. He is judgmental and sarcastic, but he makes a good point: outpourings of emotion here, on the net, may detract from outpourings of emotion elsewhere. We have too-easy access to drama on the net, and we lack a comparable drama, one that stands in reserve like the drama of the net, in our lives. The drama of the net renders our own lives boring in comparison. When something happens in the real world, it does not measure up; it rarely even receives commentary. Additionally, we have to deal with it not for a few minutes, but for months or years. The valuation of small scale drama seems like a simple elevation of the drama of the net over the tedium of reality, but I want to return to my much earlier claim that the significance of the above analysis does not lie with one term or another – with distraction or with boredom – but with the movement between those terms. Returning to this argument should illustrate what is truly “worrisome” about Reddit’s nihilism.

³⁹³ doug3465, “I’m Sorry Guys.”

Manic Investment

Default's claims about avoiding the world resonate with Kierkegaard's prescient 19th century analysis of the public. His central claim in *The Present Age* is that ours is an age of reflection rather than passion: we *think* about things instead of *doing* them.³⁹⁴ This results in an endless internal debate, which gives rise, in turn to two effects: everything becomes ambiguous, and discussion about that ambiguity comes to seem like the highest form of action. When someone does act, we publicly congratulate them, but secretly feel resentful. Envy unifies people today. With time, without action, envy becomes stronger, becoming a moral *ressentiment*,³⁹⁵ and through the media, *ressentiment* becomes levelling. Excesses, especially those that might result in action, are brought in line by a process of abstraction: levelling creates a numerical body known as the public, to which the individual belongs "as a serf belongs to an estate".³⁹⁶ We think and talk rather than act, and so many of us do this so frequently that we have a hard time imagining anything else. When we do see something else happening, the public tries to squelch it.

Now, Kierkegaard talks principally about reflection, but he also mentions boredom and distraction.³⁹⁷ These may be the more significant terms: his age may well have been one characterized by the dichotomy between reflection and action, but reflection at least implies thought. The speed of the internet often rules out even thought,

³⁹⁴ The condition of our age "is that of a man who has only fallen asleep towards morning: first of all come great dreams, then a feeling of laziness, and finally a witty or clever excuse for remaining in bed" (Søren Kierkegaard, *The Present Age: On the Death of Rebellion*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 4). This description applies, if anything, more readily today, given the screens that help keep us awake late into the night and that provide venues for our "clever excuses".

³⁹⁵ "Just as air in a sealed space becomes poisonous, so the imprisonment of reflection develops a culpable *ressentiment* if it is not ventilated by action or incident of any kind" (Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 20).

³⁹⁶ Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 26.

³⁹⁷ *Ibid*, 38-39.

leaving only a semi-conscious drift from one distraction to another. A merciless metonymy makes the applicability of Kierkegaard's analysis to Reddit, which is apparent throughout the text,³⁹⁸ particularly clear:

If I tried to imagine the public as a particular person... I should perhaps think of one of the Roman emperors, a large well-fed figure, suffering from boredom, looking only for the sensual intoxication of laughter.... [H]e wanders about, indolent rather than bad, but with a negative desire to dominate. Every one... knows how many things a Caesar could try out in order to kill time. In the same way the public keeps a dog to amuse it. That dog is the sum of the literary world. If there is some one superior to the rest, perhaps even a great man, the dog is set on him and the fun begins. The dog goes for him, snapping and tearing at his coat-tails, allowing itself every possible ill-mannered familiarity – until the public tires, and says it may stop. That is an example of how the public levels. Their betters and superiors in strength are mishandled – and the dog remains a dog which even the public despises. The levelling is therefore done by a third party; a nonexistent public levelling with the help of a third party which in its insignificance is less than nothing.³⁹⁹

Bored at work, many Redditors just want to look at something funny. They want to pass judgment on these things, and they do so by way of the karma system. This excludes opinions that stand in contrast to their own. The “literary world” with which they are intimately familiar is the internet, and the third party that helps them pass judgment is the karma system.

This description seems to cover Reddit well, making particular sense from the perspective of informational/karmic cascades (since one of their features is the relative absence of thought); however, it strikes me as too negative to apply to Redditors in

³⁹⁸ The first line of the essay, for instance, describes Reddit in concise, broad strokes: “Our age is essentially one of understanding and reflection, without passion, momentarily bursting into enthusiasm, and shrewdly relapsing into repose” (Ibid, 3). Later, he focuses on the sorts of diversions that the public, or the hivemind, wants: “This indolent mass which understands nothing and does nothing itself, this gallery, is on the lookout for distraction and soon abandons itself to the idea that everything that anyone does is done in order to give it (the public) something to gossip about” (Ibid, 38). Other places in the essay could well describe other websites, including Facebook: “With gossip... the vital distinction between what is private and what is public is obliterated, and everything is reduced to a kind of private-public gossip which corresponds more or less to the public of which it forms part.... Something that nobody would dare to tell to a gathering... can perfectly well be written for the public” (Ibid, 47).

³⁹⁹ Kierkegaard, *The Present Age*, 39.

general, who are more interested in affirming their faith in humanity than sceptically criticising their compatriots for showing off. Redditors are more likely to vote things up out of temporary enthusiasm than to vote them down out of resentment. Given their earnestness, the descriptive focus here should perhaps be on interest rather than distraction. This would help to indicate the emotional investment expressed in upvotes and sincere conversation. But this investment, which seems like a positive answer to Kierkegaard's negative description, rests on something like a terror of being bored, and of having to confront the fact of a complete inactivity that rests on the ambiguous loss of faith described above. Interest, then, is not interest for its own sake, but a means of staving off a boredom and a consideration of action that will set in when you finally leave the comfort of the net.

This is how the psychological and philosophical backdrop for Reddit that I have been examining becomes "political": the structure of the karma system, in all of its complicated expressions, tends towards boredom, introspection, and the sort of depoliticization that Kierkegaard associates with ambiguity. Levelling, numerization, and idle chat are important political phenomena on their own, and Kierkegaard is right to highlight them, but they are less important than the depoliticization that accompanies the abstract, inexpressible fear of reckoning with nihilism and grappling with whatever world it is that now remains, illuminated by the afterglow of faith. This is not an absolute abandonment of politics – there remains a politics of conversation, debate, donations, and so on – but a distancing from it, the most important aspect of which is not the formally unpolitical nature of the site, but the informal and intangible psychological remove.

Taken in this unpolitical light, Redditors' *interest* in things can be read as a manic sort of desperation. On Reddit, we know that we are not "doing" anything, so we cast about for things to at least vote on, or for something funny or important to submit. This will either be upvoted, which will make us happy, or downvoted, which will make us sad. The short period of the cycle of submission, voting, and commenting, made shorter by the effects of karmic cascading and shallower by their spread over an effectively infinite number of submissions, is exhausting. This exhaustion is compounded when we are forced to confront something as unpleasant and existentially troubling as thinking long. The end result here is a sort of virtual world weariness. The real world falls away first, but then even the virtual world starts to disappoint, and everything becomes boring, first, and eventually mildly depressing. But we vacillate, becoming completely excited by something; we switch between up states and down states. All of this happens without our actually doing anything. Redditors are emotionally invested in Reddit, but they do not experience the personal investment that accompanies the sort of action that Kierkegaard laments.

This, then, is the nihilism wrought by the net, and it is exhausting. This perhaps proves Kierkegaard's point: if we have no energy for the virtual world, then we presumably also have no energy for the real world. It may also prove Heidegger's ideas, though in a different way. To return to the concept of disposability, links on Reddit are disposable things – a part of the virtual reserve. Heidegger's ideas seem to be born out in the preceding analysis: *Bestand* and *Ge-stell* are apparent in Reddit's karma system. Again, however, the site of analysis suggests important modifications to Heidegger's ideas. The preceding explorations into informational cascades and faith in the

community demonstrate that Redditors do not treat links as simple disposables; rather, they treat them alternately as disposables and as things invested with significance. They bounce between these assessments, almost always forgetting that they imbued something with significance. The structure of the site inexorably moves its users away from the significant. This, then, is a further expansion of Heidegger's basic argument about disposability: as the karma system works to reinforce the logic of disposability, becoming more powerful by dint of repetition, it generates a set of psychological effects. Where I pointed to our collective obsession with convenience in the last chapter, I am pointing here to the mania of alternating between states of interest or investment and states of boredom.

5.4: Conclusion: Anxious Attachment

During the last months of 2010, Canadians became aware of new billings plans introduced by the larger internet service providers that would take a customer's level of usage into account. The larger telecommunications firms – Bell, Rogers, Telus, and Shaw – were slowly introducing usage based billing (UBB) plans,⁴⁰⁰ providing their customers with internet services tailored to their particular needs: casual users that went online primarily for email could purchase small plans at a lower cost, but were cautioned that they would pay more for overage, while intensive users that streamed video, played games, or made heavy use of other digital media could purchase larger plans at a higher

⁴⁰⁰ The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission had first approved UBB in May of that year (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, "Telecom Decision CRTC 2010-255," press release, May 6, 2010, accessed April 22, 2011, <http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/archive/2010/2010-255.htm>).

cost. By providing their customers with different tiers of service, the telecoms argued, they could more efficiently administer Canada's internet infrastructure, avoiding internet traffic congestion and optimizing the distribution of their services, passing savings on to low intensity users and earning higher profits at the same time.

At the same time that the major telecoms were introducing UBB, smaller ISPs, unable to achieve the economies of scale necessary to compete with the telecoms in the mainstream market, were appealing to high intensity users by offering them faster and freer service. A customer might purchase an "extreme" internet plan through Bell, for instance, and be allowed up to 100GB of data transfer per month, or she could purchase an unlimited plan through TekSavvy and be able to use the internet as much as she liked without fear of overage fees (i.e. without UBB). These smaller ISPs were able to offer these services because the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) had previously required that Bell, which had built the infrastructure with the aid of major government subsidies, must share its physical infrastructure with smaller ISPs.⁴⁰¹ Canadians had an interest in competition.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this state of affairs did not last. In January 2011, Bell convinced the CRTC that the smaller ISPs were taking unfair advantage of the line sharing agreement: the smaller ISPs' customers were using an unreasonably high amount of bandwidth, and this was costing Bell money and causing traffic congestion. Bell proposed that UBB be made mandatory for all ISPs – that companies like TekSavvy

⁴⁰¹ Michel Kelly-Gagnon and Martin Masse, "Fake Competition," *National Post*, September 9, 2010, FP-11.

should also have to impose a bandwidth cap and charge their users for overage. The CRTC agreed.⁴⁰²

Enter Reddit. On January 29th, a Redditor named trippedn posted a letter from TekSavvy outlining their new fee structure.⁴⁰³ Where he had once been allowed up to 200GB of uploads and downloads a month, he would now be allowed only 25; if he used too much bandwidth, he would pay two dollars for every extra gigabyte. He could, however, purchase an “insurance” block of extra bandwidth that would give him peace of mind for the more moderate price of a dollar per gigabyte. TekSavvy included an FAQ in its letter in which it explained the reason for this radical change in their fee structure:

On January 25, 2011, the CRTC rendered a decision allowing incumbent carriers, such as Bell Canada, to introduce UBB on the wholesale high-speed access services that TekSavvy employs to provide its own DSL-based high-speed Internet services in Ontario and Quebec, effective March 1, 2011. The introduction of UBB by those carriers effectively forces TekSavvy to pass those additional costs to its Residential DSL High-Speed Internet customers.⁴⁰⁴

TekSavvy’s letter as a whole was well crafted, and this section in particular did a brilliant job of conveying a quiet, directed outrage: you, TekSavvy’s tech savvy customer, are getting screwed because of a decision made by the CRTC that assists Bell, a company that you deliberately avoided because of the reputation that the major telecoms have for screwing their customers. You knew that you would pay a little more when you signed on with TekSavvy, but you did it because you wanted better service, and, more importantly, unlimited bandwidth. Because of this decision, we are being forced to

⁴⁰² Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, “Telecom Decision CRTC 2011-44,” press release, January 25, 2011, accessed April 22, 2012, <http://www.crtc.gc.ca/eng/archive/2011/2011-44.htm>.

⁴⁰³ trippedn, in themastersb, “Well Reddit, My Weekend Just Turned to Shit,” Reddit, accessed May 2, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/r/reddit.com/comments/fbtqa/well_reddit_my_weekend_just_turned_to_shit_im/c1erwon.

⁴⁰⁴ TekSavvy, “Usage Based Billing and New Service Packages,” accessed May 2, 2012, http://new.teksavvy.com/en/faq-ubb_on.asp.

change our policies against our will and yours. *Bell and the CRTC are forcing us to charge you these prices. How do you feel?*

Readers who came across the letter on Reddit were angry – and at the right people. The story had a compelling narrative that everyone could easily understand: freedom- and information-loving little guy is manipulated by a corrupt government and a major corporation. This was infuriating. More importantly, the story inspired fear: if this could happen in Canada – in Canada, whose citizens spend more time online than anyone else in the world⁴⁰⁵ – then it could happen anywhere. With an understandable and compelling narrative in place, the letter went viral. The thread where the TekSavvy letter was posted post received over 1600 comments, and it sparked more posts on Reddit, sympathetic discussion on other websites, and, a few days later, coverage by major news organizations in print, on TV, and on the radio. OpenMedia’s Stop the Meter petition, which the TekSavvy letter had suggested was worth signing, received hundreds of thousands of new signatures. The Liberal party joined the NDP in calling for a reversal of the CRTC decision, and within a few short days the Conservatives announced that they would be doing just that, with or without CRTC Chair Konrad von Finckelstein’s agreement. In March, with an election on the horizon, Bell buckled under the pressure, submitting a new pricing plan to the CRTC that independent ISPs would have to follow.⁴⁰⁶

On one hand, the UBB scandal is a testament to the power of democracy, and particularly to the power of democracy exercised through new electronic channels: the

⁴⁰⁵ Les Perreux, “What makes Canadians spend more time online?” *The Globe and Mail*, December 28, 2010, accessed February 1, 2011, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/technology/what-makes-canadians-spend-more-time-online/article1851469/>.

⁴⁰⁶ OpenMedia, “Bell Backs Down as the Internet Becomes an Election Issue,” press release, March 28, 2011, accessed April 22, 2011, <http://openmedia.ca/news/bell-backs-down-internet-becomes-election-issue>.

internet discovered an injustice and called enough attention to it to have it corrected.

This is certainly what the broad narrative suggests. But while the broad narrative takes certain details into account – it speaks of politics, economics, and essential freedoms in the information age – it does not necessarily address the reasons for why it came about in the first place. Why did the internet rally against UBB? What compelled Redditors to describe cheap and unlimited internet access as a basic right, and what compelled the majority of the people that came across the story to agree with them? Why did the story receive so much support?

The UBB story can be so readily framed within the discourse of liberal democracy in the internet age not only because people become upset when confronted by a huge jump in their monthly bills, but because it would make us uncomfortable to consider how the story could otherwise be framed – i.e., as an exemplar of the psycho-onto-logical intensity of our devotion to virtual life. We can see this intensity in the ease with which the public (the Canadian public, first, but the global public more generally) rejected Bell’s caricature of the high intensity bandwidth user – the World of Warcraft addict that downloads high definition pornography while illegally streaming the latest TV shows online.

But we can see that intensity much more easily in the specific comments made on Reddit that week, particularly the ones that hit the existential register. One of the most effective (and popular) was a comic from a Redditor named cookiecow living in Bahrain (drawn before the violence that would shake the country later that spring) who described his experience with UBB.⁴⁰⁷ The comic caught Reddit’s attention partly because it made

⁴⁰⁷ cookiecow, “Canada Is Lucky...” Reddit, accessed May 2, 2012, http://www.reddit.com/r/reddit.com/comments/fd7nt/canada_is_lucky/.

it clear that things in other countries were actually much worse than they might become in Canada: cookiecow paid the equivalent of \$80 USD for an inaccurately-measured 20GB of access to a *censored* internet. But it rose so high in popularity also because the Redditor's sentiments echoed those expressed less eloquently, but no less passionately, elsewhere: "The internet is my life. I need it for communication, education, and entertainment. Thus, the quality of my life is determined by the quality of my internet connection. I think this applies to most of us on reddit." The internet *is life*: threaten it and you threaten me; you threaten all of us.

As a Redditor and thoroughly devoted internet user, I followed the UBB story almost obsessively, and my attention was rewarded: there were thousands of comments to read on the TekSavvy letter alone, and hundreds more on related submissions. And that was just on Reddit. If I had been so inclined, I could have found hours of UBB-related discussion on other sites. But my attention was divided: that weekend was also one of the first of sustained protests in Egypt, and Reddit was paying them close attention. Now, this attention was no doubt partly inspired by President Hosni Mubarak's enormously misguided and incendiary decision to *turn off the internet*, but I am more concerned here to explore the way that Reddit accessed the news from Egypt. In several subsequent threads, a Redditor named Sarcasme began collecting real time information from a wide variety of news sources – major ones like CNN and Al-Jazeera, but also minor ones like blogs. He posted them in a thread in /r/worldpolitics and instructed Redditors to order the comments from newest to oldest in order to ensure that they were able to read the very newest news first. After a few posts, others joined in, linking to

updates that they had found themselves. Thousands contributed information, and many thousands more read.

On that Friday, the Reddit thread was the very best place on the net to find up to date information from Egypt, and I, among many others, followed it closely. As with the UBB story, I watched the Egypt update threads in part because I was concerned with the political stakes, but also because the story mobilized a simple, compelling narrative of democratization and liberation. The narrative lacked nuance, but it was effective and affective. That said – and this brings me back to my point about the news available on the UBB scandal – I also watched the Egypt update threads because I was fascinated by the flow of information. This had less to do with the amount of information available – despite the attempt to shut down the net, updates were, as always, trivially easy to find online – than with the efficiency of that information’s delivery. First, the structure of the update thread enabled me to read about events as soon as they happened. Second, the comment system added extra information by way of additional links and opinions. Third, the voting system made it possible for me to see how other Redditors – the members of my community – were thinking about those events. I could access events, commentary, and judgment simultaneously. It was intoxicating.

The update threads continued into the following day, and Reddit continued to provide good coverage throughout the revolution. During that period, I followed the headlines, read a little into some of the articles, and listened to the coverage of the story on the CBC – but despite that, I never felt like I knew all that much about what was happening. This was especially true in the days following the jubilant declaration of Mubarak’s resignation (announced on Reddit’s front page in all caps) when coverage

dropped off: the story seemed to have come to a close, so I could release the focus of my attention, turning it to something else. But even though I had not immersed myself in the story, and even though I was not *there*, I still felt emotional during and after the events: I was angered by the videos of demonstrators murdered, frustrated by the apparent inaction of the governments of the West, fearful of the great violence that might erupt from the military, and, most generally, excited – perhaps because of the prospect of democratic change, or perhaps simply because the coverage made me feel like I was involved. These angry emotions boiled up the night that Mubarak said that he would not bow to outside pressure, and then transformed into gladness when he announced his abdication.

What I find remarkable about both of these stories is the anxiety and over-attachment that was the consequence of the media's coverage, and especially the fine grained, obsessive attention to detail made possible by the net. In reading Reddit, I was not just following the stories about UBB or Egypt; I was following each up and down of the stories, and doing so in real time. I do not at all want to suggest that this attention was unhelpful, because I think that the many commentators who have called attention to the importance of social media in spreading the stories, particularly the decidedly real-world story about Egypt, are right to have done so; although it was not a Twitter revolution, Twitter certainly helped. But I do think that the *intensity* of our attention, or at least of my attention, is worth commenting on – especially since it exemplifies the argument that I have been making over the course of this chapter. The attention that I paid to each story helped a little: I read about UBB and responded by signing the Stop the Meter petition and telling my friends that they should do the same. Similarly, I responded to the events in Egypt by linking to two brilliant websites that were sponsoring

dial-up internet connections during the internet blackout. Although I could have called myself to task for the very limited extent of my involvement, I think that it was realistic (and representative of other Redditors) given the initial attention that I paid to each story: a small degree of involvement should have corresponded to a small degree of attention. But this small degree of involvement did not in fact correspond to the wide extent and deep intensity of my attention, brief though it was. Reading about UBB and Egypt did not really *do* anything. It did, however, bring me under the sway of a virtual boredom: it made me susceptible to the winds of fate rather than resilient to them, or *indifferent* to them.⁴⁰⁸

In losing emotional equanimity, I was cut free to swing back and forth between extremes – and this, I think, captures something of the double essence of technology and boredom. Virtual boredom involves the swing back and forth from apathy to extremity, and it finds itself on an ambiguous ground. The psycho-ontology of virtual boredom, as it is revealed on Reddit, claims to trade in certainties, but retreats from them in favour of the safety of an ambiguity that cannot threaten. This is a nihilism that retreats from itself, denying itself so that it cannot be forced to reckon with itself. No surprise, then, that the events in which this nihilism is given clearest expression – thinkinglong’s betrayal, Lucidending’s departure, and Bell’s attempt to throttle the net – involve the aporetic mortality that, as Heidegger would have it, renders every retreat and denial futile.

Although I am tempted by the poetics of concluding this chapter with a note on mortality, it is not mortality to which the internet should draw our attention, but rather its

⁴⁰⁸ Nietzsche posits indifference and postponement as the strong response to events that would compel the weak to blindly overreact: “A strong nature manifests itself by waiting and postponing any reaction: it is as much characterized by a certain *adiaphoria* as weakness is by an involuntary countermovement and the suddenness and inevitability of ‘action’” (*The Will to Power*, 28). Later, he proposes that the best course of action is always moderation (Ibid, 38).

time. The biggest problem with Reddit is not that it makes me excessively emotional, or, conversely, that it dulls all emotions, but that it engenders forgetting: it is the speed of the site – the speed of surfing in general – that is problematic, because I can never remember what it is that I have just done. I read an excellent, affective story, and I am moved in some fashion, but two links later I have forgotten about it. The secondary effect here, then, is that the internet does not change me: that affective story has no chance to gain purchase, and therefore no chance to make me do something. I might feel passion about something, but I feel it only briefly before experiencing a different passion or distraction brought on by another stimulus. I do not have the opportunity to sit with the emotion and process it consciously, as I might with an enduringly important event. Nor do I have the opportunity to experience the gradual conversion wrought by emotion that occurs due to unconscious factors, as I might in a social situation where my opinions are slowly transformed by conversation and human contextualization. Where the temporal horizon of an offline Dasein can bound Being, its online equivalent is radically limited. By dint of its temporality, the internet delimits the Redditor's world: facing a limited temporal-existential horizon, each particular human being can only remain as that particular human being. We can therefore identify a new temporal characteristic distinct to virtual boredom – forgetting – and a concomitant affective politics – the impossibility, or perhaps the de-possibilization, of existential change.

Chapter Six: Because None of Us Are as Cruel as All of Us

The previous chapters delved into two social websites where users identified themselves according to the rigid rules of Facebook or the more ambivalent norms of Reddit. I argued that virtual boredom holds sway over both sites, but that it takes a slightly different form on each: the solid ground provided by Facebook's Timeline encourages its users to see the world as something secure and ready to be browsed, while the ambiguity fostered by the combination of voting and commenting on Reddit generates a manic relationship to content involving more erratic swings between states of investment and passivity. These different manifestations of virtual boredom suggest that although Facebook, Reddit, and other social media sites may share a common ontological framework wherein the world is understood as something to be browsed rather than used, the character of person who does the browsing and the structures of the site through which this browsing takes place are not insignificant. This is not an account of a transcendental ontological form governing human action, but of particular human actions becoming concretized according to culturally and historically specific norms and eventually taking on an ontological character.

Here, I will advance this line of argument by investigating how subjects are formed on the "image board" 4chan.org, where social norms demand that users conform to community standards that vary radically from Facebook and Reddit: 4chan all but enforces anonymity, creating the conditions for a range of personal expression that vary

from the playful to the political to the hurtful.⁴⁰⁹ More significantly, 4chan's anonymity makes it possible for its users to give up the "personal" element of this personal expression. As users become more and more "anonymous", they may accede more and more to the logic of the mob. Although they may do so willingly or consciously, choosing to play along with what the collective "Anonymous" demands, there are significant structural elements at play that foster the unconscious acceptance of 4chan's "lulz"-oriented mob mentality as well.

As with previous chapters, I will pay attention to the effects that the structure of the website entails, but I will couch this analysis in a more explicit account of subjectivation, drawing on Butler in order to explain the significance of slight differences between different modes of subjectivation. Butler will prove useful for her account of the seeming impossibility of stepping "outside" the process of subjectivation. Drawing on Spinoza, Nietzsche, Freud, Althusser, and Foucault, she argues that the subject is necessarily embedded in complicated flows of power while also suggesting that the subject has a certain degree of leeway with regard to how this power flows. Butler's emphasis on the significance of repetition will prove particularly helpful given the repetitive character of a user's engagement with the internet. Through close readings of Butler and others, I will argue that the leeway in subject formation made possible by 4chan provides evidence of a boredom other than the virtual.

To make this argument, I will first examine the series of events that brought 4chan into public consciousness, during which the anonymity of the internet found itself translated into the "real world" political action carried out by Anonymous. I will

⁴⁰⁹ On the playful side, iconic 4chan activities include the creation of harmless, idiosyncratic images like "lolcats". On the hurtful side, the "trolls" of 4chan are known to prey on vulnerable people and their families – by mocking the recently deceased on Facebook profiles, for instance.

establish that what Butler calls a “postliberatory” political agency⁴¹⁰ is based on a Nietzschean conception of the guilty subject. I therefore dedicate the first section of the chapter to a general exposition of subjectivation, which I augment through the application of three perspectives on subjectivation to Project Chanology, arguing that the unconscious object of Anonymous is not non-subjectivity, but the sort of humanist love familiar from Facebook and Reddit. In order to explore the possibility that those who spend time on radically anonymous websites might throw a wrench in the clockwork order of the digital reserve, I will then turn to the “non-traditional” aspects of Anonymous. This will take me away from the case study at hand and into the form of communication prevalent at sites like 4chan, namely trolling. Here, I will argue that although the members of Anonymous who engage in political demonstration remain bound by more “traditional” limits of subjectivation, the trolls at the “heart” of Anonymous may provide evidence of a different form of subjectivation.

6.1: Project Chanology

The stories and information posted here are artistic works of fiction and falsehood. Only a fool would take anything posted here as fact.

— 4chan

In January 2008, a video of Tom Cruise discussing Scientology was leaked to YouTube. The video was apparently intended for internal Church of Scientology

⁴¹⁰ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 18.

propaganda, and not for public consumption. The Church immediately issued a legal warning to YouTube claiming a copyright violation, and YouTube removed the video. The video, which has again become available on YouTube,⁴¹¹ cast Cruise, and Scientology, in a hilariously bad light: Cruise utters incoherent statements and makes absurd claims about the powers possessed by Scientologists while music resembling the *Mission Impossible* theme song plays in the background. The removal of the video incensed a group of users loosely concentrated at 4chan, who were determined to defame Cruise and the Church, and they quickly placed the video on other video sharing sites on the internet. Something, however, had shifted; many of the users began to discuss Scientology more broadly, sharing links to stories of corruption, fraud, and death. A groundswell began, and a broad attack on the Church was mounted within days, manifesting first through mischief (conducting distributed denial-of-service attacks on Scientology websites, making prank phone calls and sending black faxes to the Church, ordering taxis and pizzas to Scientology centers), and later turning into a call for direct political action.

The nature of the political action in question is telling. The initial call – the one that attracted the attention of individuals well beyond 4chan – was posted to YouTube under the name “Message to Scientology.”⁴¹² It reads like a declaration of war,⁴¹³ and comes across as effectively threatening: the rushing grey clouds and cold cityscape of the video, impersonal and uncaring, lend the perfect backdrop to the audio – a computerized

⁴¹¹ Aleteuk, “Tom Cruise Scientology Video – (Original UNCUT),” YouTube, January 17, 2008, accessed May 7, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFBZ_uAbxS0.

⁴¹² ChurchOfScientology, “Message to Scientology,” YouTube, January 21, 2008, accessed May 7, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCbKv9yiLiQ>.

⁴¹³ See Appendix 1 for a complete transcript of the video.

voice of someone that might be anyone. The voice calmly announces its (non-)identity: “Hello, leaders of Scientology. We are Anonymous”. The capitalization of the name, immediately audible (and reinforced in the explanatory summary on the right pane of the window) and immediately confusing (how to be simultaneously anonymous and identifiable?), elicits an affective, seductive response from the viewer. We are suspicious of the seriousness of a movement that declares its intentions on the internet – on YouTube, of all places – but we are nevertheless drawn in. What is Anonymous? Who comprises it? Is it something *new*? At first, it seems that the answer is no: the message delivered veers into familiar humanist territory as Anonymous declares that it is concerned with “the good of your followers... [and] the good of mankind”, and that Scientology “will not prevail forever against the angry masses of the body politic”. The last lines are, if anything, even more clichéd: “Knowledge is free. We are Anonymous. We are Legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us”.

Aside from the affective framing of the message and the paradoxical declaration of anonymity in the form of a proper noun, then, the “Message to Scientology” seems like a commonplace manifesto. But the declaration of anonymity counts as a significant departure from other new social movements. This departure became manifest in the days that followed the declaration’s release. At 4chan and a host of related sites,⁴¹⁴ anonymous users began agitating for real world action under the operation banner “Project Chanology”. Nonviolent demonstrations were proposed, and went ahead on February 10th, March 15th, and again in subsequent months. They were tremendously successful, drawing crowds outside Scientology Centers in cities around the world.

⁴¹⁴ See 711chan.org, 888chan.org, or projectchanology.com, for instance.

Many demonstrators wore Guy Fawkes masks, paying homage to Alan Moore's *V for Vendetta*, but also doing what they do online: protecting their identity by imposing anonymity.

Can we say that the anonymous users of 4chan and the masked protesters are doing something more than merely “protecting” their “identities”? Do the humanist, pop cultural-critical actions and messages of Anonymous do anything more than veil an identity that was always already there? If the answer is no, then we can close the book on this particular case study now. In this reading, individual “members” of Anonymous are to be understood and analyzed as *individuals* first and foremost. They may be partaking in a new social movement, but the extent of its novelty can be limited to the usual comments about internet-based communications: the movement is an interesting example of de-centered protests organized at a distance in an almost spontaneous manner – but it is not even that interesting because its focus is limited and the effects that it has had have been insignificant. The Scientology protests raised the attention of media outlets around the world, and certainly helped to discredit the Church, but they are only a small contributing factor to a much wider mobilization against an obviously corrupt “religion”.⁴¹⁵

If, however, the answer is yes – if the actions of Anonymous, or even its very existence, represents a qualitative departure from identity-based politics – then it might be possible to draw conclusions from the actions of Anonymous regarding the nature of

⁴¹⁵ On the exposure of Scientology in popular culture, see especially *South Park* episode #137, “Trapped in the Closet” (directed by Trey Parker (Comedy Central, November 16, 2005), Television), in which the words “THIS IS WHAT SCIENTOLOGISTS ACTUALLY BELIEVE” are written across the screen while the president of the Church gives an account of Scientology’s “Xenu” creation myth; the *Panorama* episode “Scientology and Me” (directed by John Sweeney (BBC One, May 14, 2007), Television); and Andreas Haldal-Lund’s longstanding website Operation Clambake (accessed May 7, 2012, <http://xenu.net>).

identity, political action, and the mood of virtual boredom that may or may not govern the net.

Bad Conscience

I will first take seriously the processes of subjectivation associated with Anonymous. Here, I turn from the question of identity formation to the more foundational question of subjectivation. This is in keeping with Nietzsche's methodology in *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where he develops "a knowledge of the conditions and circumstances in which [morals] grew".⁴¹⁶ Insofar as the moral is associated with the individual – insofar as they are both unproblematically situated within ideology,⁴¹⁷ in other words – we can understand Nietzsche's insistence on a genealogical approach which uncovers the (subjective) conditions of the quotidian (i.e. the individual). Under what conditions have the morals of the (anonymous) masses been fostered?

Nietzsche's analysis of the formation of morals proceeds from the institution of "the good" through slave morality, *ressentiment*, bad conscience, and asceticism. Here, it should be sufficient to emphasize the penultimate term, which I will show to be made meaningful in time.⁴¹⁸ "[T]here could be no happiness, no cheerfulness, no hope, no

⁴¹⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 20.

⁴¹⁷ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), transcr. Andy Blunden, accessed December 16, 2008, <http://marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>.

⁴¹⁸ Temporality is a central theme of the *Genealogy*, and it is made explicit in the second essay. Nietzsche begins this chapter with the concepts of memory and forgetfulness and moves through time, promise, calculability, freedom, the creation of values, and responsibility, before arriving at the central topic, conscience.

pride, no *present*, without forgetfulness”,⁴¹⁹ Nietzsche writes; time is intimately linked to remembering and forgetting in a way that complicates its linear conception. What we emphasize to ourselves in remembrances and what we forget, deliberately or not, act on us not only in terms of affect – happiness, cheerfulness, hope, or pride – but also in terms of time. Without the ability to forget, we cannot extricate ourselves from the past; we become wrapped in memory, and that memory is all too often overcoded by guilt. As the opposite of forgetting, memory helps a person abrogate forgetfulness, especially in those cases that involve promises. But promises cannot be made with memory alone; they also require that men are, “to a certain degree”, similar, uniform, and consequently calculable. Predictability and memory are required in order for promises to be made.⁴²⁰ Our choices, then, have lasting meaning only when we can be held accountable to our promises.⁴²¹ And we are conscious of this responsibility: conscience sits in the back of the mind, telling us that we have acted correctly, or – and this is far more frequently the case for Nietzsche – that we have acted wrongly, and that we must feel bad.⁴²²

These points feed into one another. Conscience, for instance, reinforces calculability: the more a person is beholden to her conscience, and the more normalized are the consciences of those around her, the more accurately we will be able to predict her actions. Conscience also feeds back into memory, insisting that forgetting is a bad thing: if we can forget what we have done, then our consciences will not be able to

⁴¹⁹ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 58.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid*, 58-59.

⁴²¹ One is made calculable through the use of “the morality of mores and the social straitjacket”. The promising “man” becomes the “sovereign individual”. With promising comes the ability to create values, and this gives the appearance, at least, of free will. With freedom and value creation come responsibility: the values that we freely create can only have meaning if we adhere to our promises and can be held accountable.

⁴²² Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 59-60.

govern us effectively. Forgetfulness and memory-conscience thus compete in a zero sum game, and the creation of memory therefore becomes a central problem for the institution of morality. The most effective way of creating and enforcing memory, Nietzsche says, is the making-memorable of pain. If memory can be burned in, made indelible – if it “never ceases to *hurt*”⁴²³ – then the guilty party can be made to really *feel* guilty. Such subject formation requires mnemotechnical devices.

Returning to Anonymous, my question is therefore now the following: what mnemotechnical devices are employed in online processes of subjectivation – particularly those that we can perceive at work in the Scientology protests? Are memories in fact burned into these apparently modern liberal subjects, and if so, then how does this happen?

If there are processes of subjectivation at work online by which “individuals” become “subjects”, they do not immediately appear to be “violent”. This is the case with gender and sex as well: they appear to be natural categories, divided less by a mnemotechnical regime than by nature. Nevertheless, Butler argues that gender norms emerge from violence and that they are violently policed.⁴²⁴ By drawing an analogy to the imposition of identity and subjectivity, I will demonstrate that similar repetitive mechanisms are at work in the establishment of both sets of norms.

Offline, and with regard to gender, Butler demonstrates that the mnemotechnical mechanism by which gender and sex are constituted is *repetition*. Although sex is normally assumed to be a prediscursive category that founds discursively-constructed

⁴²³ Ibid, 61.

⁴²⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), xx-xxi.

genders, Butler argues that both gender and sex are discursive constructions, and that they influence one another through the repetitive movement of heteronormative desire. In heteronormativity, the male-female binary of sex is normalized in tandem with the heterosexual binary of accepted-rejected desire, and this normalizing function is violent for reasons of exclusion: all “other” terms (the transgendered, homosexual desire, the asexual lack of desire) are repetitively excluded – psychically encountered and systematically repressed. Desire is made to conform to the strictures of these binaries, and it must produce itself through an inherently violent repetition: “the power regimes of heterosexism and phallogocentrism seek to augment themselves through a constant repetition of their logic, their metaphysic, and their naturalized ontologies”.⁴²⁵

Although this seems to cast repetition in a bad light, Butler argues that there is no reason to stigmatize the mnemotechnical mechanism of repetition (or memory, to read this language back into Nietzsche) as something that “ought to be stopped – as if it could be”. Rather, “[i]f repetition is bound to persist as the mechanism of the cultural reproduction of identities, then the crucial question emerges: What kind of subversive repetition might call into question the regulatory practice of identity itself?”⁴²⁶ Given that the identity-constituting repetitive practices of everyday life cannot be avoided, Butler proposes the employment of performative “acts, gestures, and desire”.⁴²⁷ Although these acts, gestures, and desires are normally caught up in heteronormativity, “the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and a true gender is a fantasy”; different

⁴²⁵ Ibid, 44.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Ibid, 185.

performances can therefore subvert coherence and intelligibility.⁴²⁸ This is not simply an undermining of the coherence and intelligibility of one particular individual's gender, either: when the drag king or queen performs, he or she "*implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency*".⁴²⁹ Drag does not work by parodying the opposite, original gender; rather, "the parody is *of* the very notion of an original".⁴³⁰ There is no pure gender, no prediscursive sex, and no natural desire: they are all conditioned by their performances, and every action I take – every action which I am – contributes. The recognition of gender as "a performance that is *repeated*", "as a constituted *social temporality*",⁴³¹ makes possible the rendering of genders as "thoroughly and radically *incredible*".⁴³²

Anonymous Forgives and Forgets

In *Gender Trouble*, then, Butler advocates the adoption of a performative relationship to gender in order to foster incredulity – surprising, incongruous moments⁴³³ which make heteronormatively-bound observer-participants falter, question the "nature" of what is being observed, question the conditions under which their assumptions about the given order were (and are) made, and ultimately question their own sex and gender. Might we say that the actions taken by Anonymous during the

⁴²⁸ Ibid, 186.

⁴²⁹ Ibid, 187.

⁴³⁰ Ibid, 188.

⁴³¹ Ibid, 191.

⁴³² Ibid, 193.

⁴³³ Pamela Robertson, "What Makes the Feminist Camp?" in *Camp: Queer Aesthetics and the Performing Subject – A Reader*, ed. Fabio Cleto (Ann Arbor, 1999), 273.

Scientology protests foster the same sort of incredibleness, but with respect to identity in general rather than sex and gender specifically? For this to be the case, the protests would need to have evoked a “thoroughly and radically *incredible*” reaction from observers; those reading about the scenes from the sidewalks would have had to be shaken or confused about the identities of the masked protesters, about their natures as individuals, as a group, and as a cause. This was not the case. The demonstrations generated a fantastic amount of media attention, but not because they were “incredible”; they were spectacular, certainly, but not in a fundamentally subversive way. Who is the individual behind the mask? A man or a woman – a citizen of the country, a resident, an internet user, a discreet identity. What is the group? A loose collection of like-minded internet users, to be understood as an aggregation of individuals. What is the target of the demonstration? The Church of Scientology, which is surely a cult, and surely worthy of spectacular attention.

Why, then, do these individuals hide behind masks? One of the reasons is that adopting anonymity was an effective instrument in the prosecution of the protesters’ cause. The video evidence makes this interpretation compelling. I noted the latent humanism of the “Message to Scientology” earlier, and I would note now that although this current is perceptible, it is only barely so in comparison with the blatantly stylized and political message released on 9/11/08, “WE RUN THIS”.⁴³⁴ The affective register of the “Message” is cold and robotic – stylistically informed by cyberpunk narratives, but effective nonetheless. The only clues to its humanism are in the message itself. “WE RUN THIS”, on the other hand, is loud, long, and visually stimulating: bass-heavy music

⁴³⁴ VOLSUPA, “WE RUN THIS,” YouTube, September 11, 2008, accessed May 7, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0ZFow_9vsg.

plays continually in the background; the vocal delivery, while still robotic, stutters and jumps in a stereotypically “postmodern” fashion; and the background shimmers in a retro-futuristic homage to *Max Headroom*. Additionally, the message of the later video⁴³⁵ is much more blatantly liberal-humanist: the anonymous speaker complains of “crime and human rights abuses” perpetrated by the Church, of the “tendency” of the Church “to abuse the judicial system to suppress free speech”, and of “truth”. At the end of the video, the footage cuts to a different scene: one anon uses a hammer to smash in the television which had, apparently, been playing the video, and another walks up to the wreckage to use a fire extinguisher on it. After well over three minutes of rhetoric, the attempt at playful reflexivity seems somewhat hollow.

That said, these videos are just two of a whole host. Search for “anonymous” on YouTube and you will turn up hundreds of thousands of hits, some from 2008 and before, but many from recent months and weeks. When you watch one of these videos, the side of the screen displays other related videos; if the first one was at all compelling, the site presents you with the possibility of investigating further. If you remain still curious after that – and these videos are often effective enough to make internet users curious – you can do a search to find out more information about Project Chanology, Anonymous, Guy Fawkes, or any of the other interesting material you have come across so far. There is, in other words, an element of fun to Project Chanology (and to Anonymous’ activities as a whole) that encourages people who stumble across it to remain engaged, possibly leading to an eventual visit to 4chan itself. So, while those who came across protestors on the sidewalk may not have been particularly fazed or disoriented, some may have found

⁴³⁵ See Appendix 2 for a transcript of the video.

themselves interested in learning more. Project Chanology might be a gateway to something else.

Nevertheless, it seems apparent that the argument from performativity does not give us a particularly novel reading of the Scientology protests themselves. Still, it may be worthwhile to push the performative analysis beyond the performance of anonymity and into the performance of non-subjectivity. Butler's work is again helpful here. The analysis of subjectivation in *The Psychic Life of Power* suggests that the logic of performativity can be extended to the subject. In this text, Butler undertakes a genealogy of the paradox of agency at the heart of subjectivity.⁴³⁶ The genealogy she describes takes the form of a circle in which the individual and the subject engage in a double production: the subject is a pre-condition for intelligibility, and the individual is a pre-condition for the subject; the individual is pre-linguistic, but we, as subjects, name it. The individual becomes the subject through subjectivation, and this process depends on subjection. Subjection is contrasted with agency: where agency resists subordination, subjection acquiesces to subordinating forces. So, although the subject is normally conceived as the precondition to agency, the subject is now also seen to be subjected, and thus to have its agency restricted. This suggests that "in the act of opposing subordination, the subject reiterates its subjection".⁴³⁷

How are we to explain this paradox of subjection? Butler suggests that subjection, like repetition, can be productive: "A power *exerted on* a subject, subjection is nevertheless a power *assumed by* the subject, an assumption that constitutes the

⁴³⁶ The subject is neither "a necessary precondition of agency" nor "a sign of 'mastery' to be refused" (Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 10).

⁴³⁷ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 11.

instrument of that subject's becoming".⁴³⁸ The logic here fits with that of *Gender Trouble* perfectly, with "the possibility of a variation on... repetition"⁴³⁹ presented by agency being readily linked to subjection. During repetition, the structuring power of habit exerts itself on a subject, but this power can be assumed by that subject and twisted through the enactment of performativity. Subjection, in other words, can be transformed into agency through the repetitive performativity of alternative forms of subjectivity. This constitutes the generalization of the performativity of gender to the performativity of subjectivity. Drag presents Butler with a corporeal example of the performativity of gender. Given the fact that we can extend the logic of performativity from the site of gender to the more general site of subjectivity, we might also expect to be able to extend the example of drag from the material to the immaterial. Anonymous may count as an instance of an online performativity.

The repetitive element of the formation of subjectivity certainly seems to be at work online. Internet use, as I have argued throughout this dissertation, is generally routine, and becoming more and more routinized. If it is true that the subject is partly shaped by her browsing habits, then she should also be able to enact an online performativity that would translate into or have effects on the corporeal world. According to this thesis, the user that assumes an alternative identity online would be subverting established norms of subjectivity. This parallel does not at first seem to hold. Where the drag queen subverts a gender identity which has already been established, the person that "dresses in virtual drag" is structurally incapable of subverting an *established* gender identity, since there *is* no gender identity prior to going online. The act is a

⁴³⁸ Ibid.

⁴³⁹ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 198.

performance, but because neither the performer nor the audience assumes a fixed identity, the performance is non-subversive. The experienced internet user cultivates a cynical or playful attitude towards all claims about identity, and is never surprised to find these claims undermined. Although this parallel does not hold, it might be possible to posit a more radical one between corporeal performativity and the digital performance of non-subjectivity. When a user interacts with other users without assuming any identity whatsoever, the assumption of the subject itself can be performatively displaced. This idea harkens back to early commentary that held that the internet would provide a forum for non-prejudicial interaction between anonymous equals – an idea that has been belied by the incredibly rapid spread of social networking sites, image sharing services, instant messaging, and so on. When another individual is encountered online, whether on a social networking site where that individual is clearly-defined, or in a virtual gaming world where she is mediated but also cleanly represented by an avatar, or even on a message board where graphical representation is foregone in favour of simple textual user names, the assumption is made that that other individual is indeed an *individual* – a discrete, human *subject* that is consciously engaging in the online interaction. But when the individual subject that we assume is there is displaced or renounced through the declaration of anonymity, a transgressive performativity takes place.

This phenomenon of digital performativity is readily perceptible on sites like 4chan, where there is no doubt that the anonymous users posting messages and images in a continuous stream of absurdity are actual human individuals. The disconcerting sensation of incredulity comes from the knowledge that the anonymous mass is certainly made up of “individual” users coupled with the sensation that there is a non-

individualized, hive-like (il)logic at work. On the /b/ message board of 4chan, almost all users post without entering a user name, and their comments thus appear under the name “Anonymous”: there is no way of telling who is responsible for any given post. Indeed, the structure of /b/ insists that the word “who” has no meaningful content on the internet. When 4chan users speak to one another they often refer to each other as “anons” (e.g. “wise anon is wise”), or address 4chan as a whole rather than its members (e.g. “what does /b/ think of this?”). When they do so, they are performing non-subjectivity.

Perspectives on Subjectivation

I have left the term “non-subjectivity” deliberately ambiguous up until this point. In the introductory pages of *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler gives the reader the strong sense that subjectivation in general is inescapable, and that a term like non-subjectivity may thus be meaningless. Nevertheless, I employ this word rather than de- or re-subjectivation in order to highlight the difference between political declarations of identity and Anonymous’ declaration of non-identity. I turn now to Butler’s three-part analysis of perspectives on subjectivation in order to clarify the term, and to demonstrate that it serves a useful function in the analysis of Anonymous.

The regulatory power that “maintains subjects in subordination by producing and exploiting the demand for continuity, visibility, and place”⁴⁴⁰ is the first of these perspectives. According to Butler, if “the subject” is “a placeholder, a structure in

⁴⁴⁰ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 29.

formation”,⁴⁴¹ and if the subject and the individual are co-productive, then it seems like there is no “outside” to subjectivity, or no possibility of a non-subjectivity. We are all simultaneously bound and enabled by processes of subjectivation; we might even go so far as to say that we are nothing other than these processes. When Butler invokes Nietzsche’s aphorism on the doer and the deed (in her words: “there is no subject prior to [the] effect” of subjection),⁴⁴² this certainly seems to be what she has in mind: the subject is the fictional construction of power that, though fictional, also makes use of power.⁴⁴³ In a modulation of Foucault’s work on disciplinary and regulatory power, Butler suggests that “the internalization of the norm contribute[s] to the production of internality” – that is, to the production of the psychic.⁴⁴⁴ The inside/outside split apparent in the subject is generated by and generative of power. Furthermore, the constitutive aspect of power that demonstrates the easy complication of the inside/outside distinction illustrates that the subject, as “inside”, is vulnerable to the “outside”, or that it is “an exploitable kind of being”. Thus, if one “is to oppose the abuses of power” – that is, if one is to attempt to enact a sort of subjectivity that is not always-already subordinated – “it seems wise to consider in what our vulnerability to that abuse consists”.⁴⁴⁵

For Butler, this vulnerability must be explained in both psychic and social-existential terms. The second perspective on subjectivation – the recognition of the production of melancholia – deals with psychic vulnerability. Butler begins this analysis with conscience, marrying Nietzsche’s account of the formation of the bad conscience

⁴⁴¹ Ibid, 10.

⁴⁴² Ibid, 13.

⁴⁴³ Ibid, 14.

⁴⁴⁴ Ibid, 19.

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid, 20.

with Sigmund Freud's analysis of repression and foreclosure. The subject becomes an object for itself through conscience, recognizing itself as an actor that is always-already implicated in a world that it has helped to construct, and thus a world for which it is partially responsible. This process is based on more than the Cartesian recognition of oneself in (and as) thought. Rather, it requires the reflexive recognition of the way in which desire implicates the self and the world. Desiring actions lead to guilt and to self-punishment, but desire itself might be closed down if one recognizes oneself as an object for the reflexive recognition of that very desire. It is clear, however, that this attempt to close down desire does not stop desire in general: "[t]he doubling back of desire that culminates in reflexivity produces... another order of desire: the desire for that very circuit, for reflexivity and, ultimately, for subjection".⁴⁴⁶

We have here the circular production of the desire for desire – a confusing formulation that is clarified through the distinction that Freud makes between repression and foreclosure. A repressed desire may once have existed apart from its prohibition, and may thus be consciously known, but a foreclosed desire has never been allowed to exist. The latter term thus works to constitute the subject “through a certain kind of pre-emptive loss”. When that loss is the loss of love – when, in other words, certain forms of desire are subconsciously barred – we can speak of a melancholia that “signals an incomplete and irresolvable grief” that acts as “the limit to the subject's sense of *pouvoir*” and thus the limit to the subject's ability to reflect.⁴⁴⁷ This inability to reflexively consider the self as both subject and object indicates *a limit to the guilt-based process of subjectivation*. If the subject cannot recognize a part of itself – that part that desires something that has

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid, 22.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid, 23.

been pre-emptively foreclosed – as an object, then the subject cannot be completely, totally guilty, and Nietzsche’s account of bad conscience cannot be cast in a totalizing light. This returns us to the theme of a “postliberatory” subjectivity: if the subject is not completely guilty, then we cannot speak of an absolute “liberation” from guilt, but only of a sort of dwelling-within subjectivation. If there is a loss “that cannot be thought, cannot be owned or grieved, which forms the condition of possibility for the subject”, then there is an aporetic “impossibility” – a dwelling-within – at work in subjectivation that might provide an avenue to a partial desubjectivation.⁴⁴⁸

The third perspective on subjectivation is an account of a performative iterability that undermines apparently existential social terms. Here Butler invokes Spinoza, connecting the conative drive to continue existing with the guilt-based desire to continue one’s *social* existence, and thus implying that all desire is ultimately the desire to be-with. The drive to exist is not free from the psychic forces of desire, and hence not free from the guilt-oriented constituting processes of subjectivation. So what it would mean for the subject to desire something different? Desiring something other than (social) existence would necessitate a cessation of a certain kind of existence, but Butler suggests that this is a death that might but “courted or pursued, in order to expose and open to transformation the hold of social power on the conditions of life’s persistence”:

The subject is compelled to repeat the norms by which it is produced, but that repetition establishes a domain of risk, for if one fails to reinstate the norm “in the right way,” one becomes subject to further sanction, one feels the prevailing conditions of existence threatened. And yet, without a repetition that risks life – in its current organization – how might we begin to imagine the contingency of that organization, and performatively re-configure the contours of the conditions of life?⁴⁴⁹

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid, 24.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid, 28-29.

In other words, the subject cannot fully extricate itself from the social or ideological conditions of its reproduction. Here, Butler takes her understanding of subjectivation from Louis Althusser, who argues that we are subjects from birth, enmeshed in a web of subjectivizing ideologies.⁴⁵⁰ However, the method by which these norms are reproduced is, as before, repetition. Butler's analysis here is akin to the analysis of performativity in *Gender Trouble*: repetition is never the repetition of the exact same, if for no other reason than the temporal period that has elapsed. Existential conditions change, and this means that every repetition of the conditions of the reproduction of subjectivity bears the "risk" of denaturing those conditions. If this occurs, then subjectivity changes: "one becomes subject to further sanction [i.e. by the socially-implicated forces of Nietzschean bad conscience], one feels the prevailing conditions of existence threatened". There is *a* death here – the death of the *prevailing* conditions – but not the threat of death itself, because the conative drive is not pure, but implicated in the desire to exist in the social order. This death engenders sanction and thus guilt, but it does not automatically bind the deviant subject to penance. Because the partial death of the subject has freed it in part from the social order, the ideological strictures that insist on the proper observance of guilt have lost their effectiveness. It is thus possible to "performatively re-configure the contours of the conditions of life".

In summary, then, Butler argues that the subject can be reconstituted through the appropriation of power, melancholy, and iteration. These three perspectives on subjectivation imply one another: power does not flow in an extra-psychic vacuum, and the psyche is not closed off to the performative effects of iteration. Furthermore, none of

⁴⁵⁰ Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."

these perspectives suggest that subjectivity itself can be transcended. This does not mean that the term “non-subjectivity” is without meaning, however. Indeed, it may be the case that an “individual” who has been psychically reconstituted may appear, from the perspective of those that are still bound up in normal social existence, to have been desubjectivized.

Anonymity and Non-Subjectivity

So, if we can take “non-subjectivity” to mean a *relative* desubjectivation that *appears* to be an absolute death of the subject, the question becomes the following: do we see evidence of this process at work in Project Chanology? Put another way: is there a psychic loss that cannot be thought that we can perceive in the protests, and thus an impossibility at work in anonymous (de)subjectivation? Since this psychic loss is at work in all instances of subjectivation, is there something uniquely aporetic about the psychic loss that we might perceive in the protests?

To give an answer to these questions, we need to identify the object of Anonymous desire, and whether or not that desire functions in terms of repression or foreclosure. The declared goal of the protesters from the “Message to Scientology” is the expulsion of Scientology “from the Internet” and the “systematic dismantling” of the Church “in its present form”.⁴⁵¹ Scientology is derided as a cult, which is to say as a quasi-religious organization that is both irrational and malicious. Additionally, it is defended by irrational and popular celebrity figures, both in the media and behind closed

⁴⁵¹ See Appendix 1.

doors. The derision of Anonymous stems largely from its hatred of irrationality, veiled malice, and celebrity. Is guilt at work here? Does Anonymous resent Scientology because of a failure to contain its own irrationality? If Freud is right when he suggests that love is always attended by hate and the fear of the loss of love is the origin of guilt,⁴⁵² then we can infer that when Anonymous professes a love for “mankind” as a whole, it also demonstrates a fear of the *loss* of this love. And even though many anons will make claims to their independence and relative inhumanity, Anonymous, as a political entity, depends on the love of “mankind” just as much as the rest of us, in just the social-existential sense that Butler outlines. This implies that the existence and growth of Scientology, which threatens mankind with irrationality and malice and makes this threat painfully obvious through celebrity, illustrates to Anonymous that, at its foundation, it is ridden by subjective feelings of guilt. Because guilt plays such a vital role in subjectivation, this means that Scientology poses the *explicit* threat of subjection/subjectivation to the members of Anonymous.

This in turn explains why Anonymous is so intent on dismantling the Church. The “*objet petit a*” of the Anonymous of the Scientology protests is not some philosophical abdication of subjectivity, but acceptance. Anonymous seeks to free itself of its dependence on the love of mankind, which it perhaps understands to be a fiction manufactured by desire, and it recognizes the extraordinary difficulty of this task when presented with the figure of the Church. If this is the case, then the Anonymous desire for non-subjectivity is foreclosed rather than repressed, since the object of desire is

⁴⁵² Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York and London: W. W. Norton and Company, 1961), 72-73, 85.

“rigorously barred” – pre-emptively forbidden.⁴⁵³ Anonymous desire is thus melancholic, and functions according to the same logic of subjectivation that Butler describes: “[m]elancholia rifts the subject, marking a limit to what it can accommodate”. A member of Anonymous can no more “accommodate” non-subjectivity than a regular person. The deliberate refusal to use proper names and the donning of masks can be understood in this context as a symptom of this unrealized desire.

That said, we *may* find something psychoanalytically different in Anonymous if we broaden our understanding of the phenomenon to include actions aside from the Scientology protests. The work of the protesters only tends toward non-subjectivity incidentally or instrumentally, and it is first and foremost an affirmation of the same guilt conditions (freedom, truth, reason) that bind humanist subjects. No one is more aware of this than the “troll core” of Anonymous, which is particularly resentful of the political action and positive press generated by Project Chanology. At *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, a Wikipedia-style resource that irreverently catalogues events on the internet⁴⁵⁴, the page for “Project Chanology” begins with a subsection named “HEY FAGGOTS”:⁴⁵⁵

⁴⁵³ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 23.

⁴⁵⁴ All references here to *Encyclopedia Dramatica* are from 2008 or 2009. As a freely editable resource run by trolls, nearly none of these references can still be found in the form in which I present them. Such is the nature of the internet. Compounding the problem was a dramatic incident that took place in 2011: *Encyclopedia Dramatica*’s founder, Sherrod Grippio, shut down *Encyclopedia Dramatica* and started another site called Oh Internet. Users of *Encyclopedia Dramatica* were predictably furious, but many reacted constructively, successfully launching a mirror of the original site at <http://encyclopedia-dramatica.se>. For a more detailed description of the incident, see Luke Simcoe, “Encountering 4chan and Anonymous: The Drama of *Encyclopedia Dramatica*,” *Metaviews*, April 16, 2011, accessed May 2, 2012, <http://metaviews.ca/encountering-4chan-and-anonymous-the-drama-of-encyclopedia-dramatica>.

⁴⁵⁵ A quick word on the word “faggot”: on 4chan, this word functions in a fashion that differs from everywhere else. It is clearly an offensive term, and that is deliberate – it keeps out the mainstream – but it also denotes something other than homosexuality. For 4chan, “fag” usually refers to those who frequent the image board, though it almost always has a prefix: “old fags” have been around for a long time, “fag fags” are (literally) gay, and “moral fags” might be offended by this very free use of the word “faggot”. This use of language is typical of 4chan, where the high rate of anonymity and relative absence of rules creates an environment where “anything goes”, and where one is likely to encounter pornography, gore, misogyny,

Ok, newfags, here's the ~~news~~ facts:

1. Anonymous is not some “awesome group of awesome people doing awesome acts of kindness and awesomely hacking things.”
2. Anonymous does not care about other people.
3. Anonymous is not some avenging army.
4. Anonymous is **not** YOUR personal army.
6. True Anon have long since forsaken any scrap of humanity.
7. If you want to be a lovey dovey faggot, Paul Fetch's group is that way. ----->
9. If you want a cause, join greenpeace. Don't fucking call yourself Anon.
10. If you are part of the chanology cause (member of enturbulation or any of their other forums, or “*chans”) again, **DONT FUCKING CALL YOUSELF ANON!, WE WERE ANONYMOUSFIRST. YOU GUYS AREN'T ALLOWED IN THE TREEHOUSE.**⁴⁵⁶

So: who *is* allowed in the tree house?

6.2: The Internet Hate Machine

The term “trolling” began to be widely used in the late 1980s to describe someone who intentionally disrupted early internet communities, like those that were beginning to form on Usenet. According to Mattathias Schwartz, “[t]he trolls employed... a ‘pseudo-naïve’ tactic, asking stupid questions and seeing who would rise to the bait. The game was to find out who would see through this stereotypical newbie behavior, and who would fall for it”. Single individuals were usually responsible for this early form of trolling; now, however, the game is more often played by groups of anonymous individuals based in message or image boards like /b/. And because “our emotional

racism, homophobia, or any combination of the above. At the same time, however, the anonymity of the site creates the conditions under which strange and progressive modes of expression, political and otherwise, can take place. On these conditions and the associated use of language on 4chan, see Michael Bernstein et al., “4chan and /b/: An Analysis of Anonymity and Ephemerality in a Large Online Community” (paper presented at the Fifth International AAAI Conference on Weblogs and Social Media), July 5, 2011, accessed May 8, 2012, <https://www.aaai.org/ocs/index.php/ICWSM/ICWSM11/paper/view/2873>.

⁴⁵⁶ “Project Chanology,” *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, accessed December 16, 2008, http://encycopediadramatica.com/Project_Chanology.

investment in the Internet has grown, the stakes for trolling — for provoking strangers online — have risen. Trolling has evolved from ironic solo skit to vicious group hunt”.⁴⁵⁷

Schwartz’ discussion of trolling focuses largely on 4chan’s /b/, and with good cause. Because the individuals using that image board almost never attach a pseudonym to a post, they can give the illusion, at least, that they are free of identity. There are no profiles on 4chan, and thus no continuity of identity. Most importantly, there is no “contextual information about the writer, information that, while quite sketchy, may be the only such cues in the posting”.⁴⁵⁸ Trolling is often associated with the misrepresentation of identity. In the case of Usenet messages, for instance, the troll “attempts to pass as a legitimate participant, sharing the group’s common interests and concerns; the newsgroup members, if they are cognizant of trolls and other identity deceptions, attempt to both distinguish real from trolling postings and, upon judging a poster to be a troll, make the offending poster leave the group”.⁴⁵⁹ But this pattern of deception, baiting, and exile only works when the trolls assume a pseudonym. Without the contextual information conveyed by the pseudonym, the nature of trolling changes.

When trolling attacks are carried out en mass and anonymously, they are referred to as raids. The purpose is to generate lulz – “the joy of disrupting another’s emotional equilibrium”, or “a quasi-thermodynamic exchange between the sensitive and the cruel”.⁴⁶⁰ The self-righteous and the naïve make particularly good targets for raids, as

⁴⁵⁷ Mattathias Schwartz, “Malwebolence: The World of Web Trolling,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 3, 2008, accessed December 16, 2008, http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/03/magazine/03trolls-t.html?_r=1.

⁴⁵⁸ Judith S. Donath, “Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community,” in *Communities in Cyberspace*, eds. Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock, 27-58 (London and New York, 1999).

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁰ Schwartz, “Malwebolence.” For further analysis of lulz, see Gabriella Coleman, “Our Weirdness Is Free,” *Triple Canopy* 15 (January 13, 2012), accessed May 2, 2012,

they will often respond with aggression and confusion, further increasing the lulz. As one of Schwartz's anonymous troll contacts puts it:

You look for someone who is full of it, a real blowhard. Then you exploit their insecurities to get an insane amount of drama, laughs and lulz. Rules would be simple: 1. Do whatever it takes to get lulz. 2. Make sure the lulz is widely distributed. This will allow for more lulz to be made. 3. The game is never over until all the lulz have been had.⁴⁶¹

The following “classic” raids⁴⁶² on GoddessMine and Oprah help to illustrate the difference between pseudonymous and anonymous raiding, and show that the nature of the social and the nature of guilt in the anonymous actions of 4chan is unique. This will help to demonstrate that there is in fact something that psychoanalytically differentiates the trolls of Anonymous from those anons that have taken part in the protests against Scientology.

GoddessMine

According to the *Encyclopedia Dramatica* article on the raid,⁴⁶³ GoddessMine is a “self-styled financial dominatrix”. Financial domination is a masochistic practice in which the dominatrix demands tributes from her subjects, “and, in return, does absolutely... nothing, other than verbally abusing the submissive ‘client’”. GoddessMine operated in various BDSM (bondage & discipline / dominance & submission / sadism &

http://canopycanopycanopy.com/15/our_weirdness_is_free, and Gabriella Coleman, “Phreaks, Hackers, and Trolls: The Politics of Transgression and Spectacle,” in *The Social Media Reader*, ed. Michael Mandiberg, 99-119 (New York: NYU Press, 2012).

⁴⁶¹ Quoted in Schwartz, “Malwebolence.” See also Whitney Phillips, “Meet the Trolls,” *Index on Censorship* 40.2 (2011): 68-76.

⁴⁶² For more recent raids, as well as for an introduction to 4chan in general, see Cole Stryker, *Epic Win for Anonymous: How 4chan's Army Conquered the Web* (New York and London: Overlook Duckworth, 2011).

⁴⁶³ “GoddessMine,” *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, accessed December 16, 2008, <http://encyclopediadramatica.com/GoddessMine>.

masochism) sites and on LiveJournal, a personal and community blogging service. Users of 7chan, a site modeled on 4chan, discovered her profile last December on LiveJournal, where “she bragged about the ‘tributes’ she had received... [and gave] instructions on how to... worship her”.⁴⁶⁴ Sensing that GoddessMine would be a bountiful source of lulz, insulting anonymous comments were made on her LiveJournal, which had, until that point, been publicly accessible. GoddessMine responded by making her entries private, and posting an incendiary message in which she called the anons “dumb dumb virgins” that should go back to “jerk[ing] off in the closet while your sister changes outfits”. She also suggested that she had “a legion of ANON SPIES working for Me on these great INTERNETZ”.

Encyclopedia Dramatica describes the effects of her comments perfectly: “[t]his was the internet equivalent of pulling down a wasps’ nest, dropkicking it, and then pissing on the shattered fragments. Except that some of these wasps were hax0rs”. Anonymous hackers from 7chan, 4chan, and other anonymous websites quickly started collecting information on GoddessMine, and found out that she was a kindergarten teacher at a private school. Although the vast majority of 4chan users have no problem with pornography or sexual deviancy, the community does seem to be united against sexual predation on children; child pornography is one of the only items which cannot be posted on 4chan, and which will result in being banned from the boards (and often

⁴⁶⁴ According to the *Encyclopedia Dramatica* entry, the instructions included the following: “In order for you shiteaters to stay within My good graces, I expect no less than \$100 for any type of tribute you make (cash, gift cards, etc.). Additionally, this is on the assumption that you piglets will make these tributes regularly - every day or every week, it’s up to you pea-brains, but it is essential that your tributes are regular; I don’t have the time nor the patience.... This isnt about you, this is about Me - this entire experience is about pleasing My desires, needs, and realities as a powerful Financial Domme Goddess - but perhaps through it all, all you turkey washouts will experience nirvana, too. So I’m inclined to repeat Myself: DO NOT apply or inquire about Me if you are not serious about giving up your money, bank accounts, wallets, and life to Me. I deserve only the best in this mediocre lifetime, so that means I’m expecting fine dining, luxurious livingspace, and beautiful adornments for My body.”

reported to the police). GoddessMine was not a child pornographer, but the trolls could cut corners by associating her side career as a financial dominatrix with sexual deviancy, and thus put her work as a kindergarten teacher in a very bad light. Anonymous sent a message to GoddessMine's school posing as a concerned parent, attaching screenshots and quotations from her website. Threatening phone calls were made to her house. Finally, Anonymous reported her to the IRS, noting that she had been collecting fees for a service without reporting it as taxable income.⁴⁶⁵

At this point, GoddessMine posted a message to 4chan, including a picture of herself holding a card that showed her signature and the time at which she had taken the picture – timestamp evidence to prove that she was in fact GoddessMine. The message was an attempt to “appeal to anon’s good sense (404 not found)”;⁴⁶⁶ GoddessMine asked that Anonymous “stop now, but I know being /b/, this is predictably going to only fuel some of you into trying harder. The FBI will be involved today and will be investigating those of you who continue to harass me over the Internet, if my personal request to you does not work”. Anonymous “was now armed with the knowledge that their raid was in fact working, so they doubled the dataforce in an effort to drive her off the web permanently”. Given the information provided in the *Encyclopedia Dramatica* entry, this seems like an exaggeration; the only other action taken seems to have been the hacking of GoddessMine’s school’s website so that the front page detailed her career as a dominatrix. Undoubtedly, Anonymous had, at that point, done all that it could do.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶⁵ “GoddessMine,” *Encyclopedia Dramatica*.

⁴⁶⁶ The parenthetical reference to “404 not found”, an error message that sometimes appears when entering in a poor URL, suggests that Anonymous does not have “good sense”.

⁴⁶⁷ “GoddessMine,” *Encyclopedia Dramatica*.

When GoddessMine asked Anonymous for mercy, some individual anons might have been willing to grant it out of a sense of guilt. Others, however – probably the majority – would not. One cannot not reason with a multitude, let alone appeal to its conscience. If any of its members are not susceptible to reason or conscience, then the trolling will proceed, and even if individual trolls decide to stop actively trolling, they are still participating in the raid by viewing its results and enjoying the lulz. Hence the motto: “Because none of us are as cruel as all of us.”

Oprah

On September 15th, 2008, *The Oprah Show* featured a discussion of pedophiles that use the internet to prey on children. A thread was opened up the show’s website titled “Internet Predators: How Bad Is It?”, and a user identifying as “josefritzl”⁴⁶⁸ posted the following brief message on the forum:

WE DO NOT FORGIVE
WE DO NOT FORGET
WE HAVE OVER 9000 PENISES AND THEY ARE ALL RAPING
CHILDREN!⁴⁶⁹

The message was immediately followed by another in which a user named “lordxenu” – a reference to Scientology, and hence to Anonymous – claimed to be a pedophile preschool teacher who gets “aroused at the sight of a young boy ‘peeing in the potty’” but who does

⁴⁶⁸ The username is a reference to Josef Fritzl, the Austrian man that imprisoned his daughter in 1984 in an underground bunker and sexually abused, raped, and physically assaulted her for 24 years.

⁴⁶⁹ “Oprah,” *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, accessed December 16, 2008, <http://encyclopediadramatica.com/Oprah>.

not “act upon my urges”.⁴⁷⁰ Oprah took the messages literally, and paraphrased them on television on September 19th:

Let me read you something that was posted on our message board from somebody who claims to be a member of a known pedophile network. It said this: he doesn't forgive; he does not forget; his group has over 9000 penises and they are all raping children. So, I want you to know, they're organized, and they have systematic ways of hurting children, and they use the internet to do it.⁴⁷¹

Oprah had been trolled.

There were three stages to this raid. In the first, anons alerted 4chan to the *Oprah* episode on child pornography, and suggested that her community forums should be targeted for a raid. The thread for that particular episode had attracted an exceptional amount of genuine rage, disgust, and support for Senate Bill 1738, the “Protect Our Children Act”, which meant that it was the perfect target for generating drama. In the second, josefritzl, lordxenu, and others posted upsetting comments that were either in favour of child pornography, as with josefritzl's comment, or intended to excuse the actions of pedophiles. User josefritzl's comment was believable enough that the system administrators that monitored the forum alerted Oprah, who integrated the comment into her show. Additionally, they immediately stripped the offending comments from the forum. Nevertheless, the forum was live and accessible for a long enough period of time that a number of extraordinarily offensive messages could be spammed. A user named “happynigra”, for instance, copied and pasted the phrase “OPRAH IS A FUCKING CHICKEN EATING NIGGER!!!” down the length of the page.⁴⁷²

⁴⁷⁰ Although josefritzl and lordxenu were using pseudonyms rather acting completely anonymously, their “status” ratings are zero, and they have no information on their profiles, meaning that the identity-related form of trolling does not apply here.

⁴⁷¹ See DIEgestthis, “Oprah gets trolled by Anonymous,” YouTube, February 7, 2012, accessed May 7, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2x0bv-WisEc>, for footage from the program.

⁴⁷² “Oprah,” *Encyclopedia Dramatica*.

At this point, raids normally wind down, and the denizens of /b/ turn their attention to something else. But because Oprah took the comments at face value, interpreting the flood of racist, pedophile comments on the forum as evidence of a systematic organization of pedophiles, the raid entered a third stage. The “over 9000” part of josefritzl’s comment – “over 9000 penises” – is a phrase taken from an episode of *Dragonball Z*, an anime program popular in North America.⁴⁷³ The phrase is a meme on 4chan, and well-recognized on news aggregating websites like Slashdot, Reddit, and Digg as a signifier of 4chan and /b/. Because of this, and because of the earnest manner of its deliver, Oprah’s comment spread across the internet like virtual wildfire.⁴⁷⁴

Pack Hunting

The objectives of the Oprah forum raid were different than that of the GoddessMine raid. In the latter, Anonymous aimed to “drive [GoddessMine] off the web permanently”, and to cause her financial and emotional trauma.⁴⁷⁵ The reason for doing this was partly because of a sense of disgust at the way in which she abused her clients, and partly for the lulz. In the Oprah raid, on the other hand, no one aimed to destroy lives. Comments like happynigra’s were designed to be as offensive as possible in order to upset the forum’s readership, but there was no specific target for the raid. The only objective was the generation of lulz. Nevertheless, in both cases, and ironically, some “good” may have been done. Although trolls generally disdain political causes, which

⁴⁷³ One of the characters asks what the “power level” of an opponent is, and another replies, “It’s over *nine thousand!*”

⁴⁷⁴ “Oprah,” *Encyclopedia Dramatica*.

⁴⁷⁵ “GoddessMine,” *Encyclopedia Dramatica*.

they characterize as “moral faggotry”, both of the above raids resulted in real world effects, even if they were only marginal: GoddessMine, a “sexual deviant”, was reported to the parents and administrators at her school, and Oprah’s viewership was given yet another reason to fight child pornography. But those claims are problematic at best: there is no evidence, either political or ethical, to demonstrate that GoddessMine should have been separated from the children at her school, and there is no reason to believe that talk show fear mongering will have any effect, let alone an unequivocally “good” effect, on legislation or policing. If there were any “real” or “political” effects that occurred as a result of these two raids, they were entirely incidental to the carefully circumscribed purpose of the raids: the lulz.

The achievement of the singular purpose of the raids is facilitated by the amorality of the raiding group as a whole. Again, while individual trolls may eventually back down, the group will not. Raids therefore have conscience-altering effects on the individual participants. *Encyclopedia Dramatica* is once more the best source for a caricatured account of these effects:

Novice trolls often experience troll's remorse [“that sinking feeling in your stomach when you make someone cry on the Internet for the first time”]. Such feelings tend to pass once they realize that people who take the Internets seriously enough to get upset by trolling really ought to kill themselves. Once they reach this point, they are said to suffer from Internet troll personality disorder [“attention-seeking and disruptive behavior in anonymous, delocalized places of socializing”]. After long enough, they may even develop Chronic Troll Syndrome [in which the troll is “unable to tell the difference between internet and IRL limits”].⁴⁷⁶

We can connect this pop-psychological account of conscience change with our prior discussion of guilt. I said earlier that conscience reinforces calculability – that there is a

⁴⁷⁶ “Troll,” *Encyclopedia Dramatica*, accessed December 16, 2008, <http://encycopediadramatica.com/Troll>.

reciprocal relationship between these psychic aspects. Anonymous, as we have seen, has no conscience and cannot be calculated. From “our” standpoint “outside of” Anonymous, we cannot predict the actions of the trolls. We can speculate about the methods that they will use once they have selected a target, and we know that the raid will result in lulz, but we cannot predict who they will attack, or when. When Anonymous conducts raids, it is less calculable than the normal individual. Anonymous is unpredictable in this sense precisely because trolls are not susceptible to conscience or reason.

I also said that conscience feeds back into memory in a similarly reciprocal way through the employment of mnemotechnical devices. Anonymous certainly does not have anything against memory in general, as the screenshot evidence of troll raids scattered across *Encyclopedia Dramatica* makes evident. However, Anonymous is also not in favour of a memory which is associated with conscience or guilt. More than that: the “chronic trolls” would have a hard time understanding why screenshot evidence of pain, like GoddessMine's photo, should be cause for remorse when it strikes the (troll) reader as so obviously hilarious. Anonymous is interested in neither forgetfulness nor remembrance; its form of memory is free from these normative strictures. Pain therefore cannot be made memorable. If there are mnemotechnical devices at work here at all, they are in the hands of the trolls, as they are the ones instituting and repeating the memes that mock their victims. The “over 9000” meme, for instance, is endlessly repeated on 4chan, but its indelible effects have nothing to do with pain. Indeed, the repetition of these sorts of memes constitutes a performativity that rejects normative conscionable reactions: the troll is supposed to feel bad for preying on the naivety of *Oprah* fans, but she has gone

through the trolling motions far too many times to even consider this reaction possible. The attack is performative because it is not concerned with mocking the outrage of the *Oprah* fans, but with mocking the notion of any kind of moral outrage at all. When a raid involves the parodic imitation of its moral targets, it is always the parody “of the very notion of an original”⁴⁷⁷ morality.

Anonymous Does Not Hail

If raids thus do their part to remove conscience and guilt, they also help to alter the social-existential conditions in which they take place. Without the contextual information provided by usernames, recognizable speech patterns, signatures, and so on, and considering the replacement of *these* mnemotechnical devices by the *performative* devices of memes, the meaning of the idea of the “social existence” necessarily changes. Aside from the distinctiveness of the language and behaviour patterns observable on /b/,⁴⁷⁸ we can demonstrate this through the notion of a shift in the relative importance of various ideological state apparatuses (ISAs). For Althusser, two conditions of production must be reproduced by state apparatuses: the relations of production which exist materially but independently of consciousness, and the productive forces. The reproduction of the relations of production requires not only the maintenance of the material conditions of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but also the inculcation of a properly submissive sort of subjectivity: this means the

⁴⁷⁷ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 175.

⁴⁷⁸ Examples of distinctive language include “hivemind”, in which different users post the same comment at the same time; “combos”, where users follow the same train of thought throughout a thread; the development and propagation of memes; post number games, in which users are instructed to perform some action based on the number of their post; and every kind of blatant, irreverent hate speech imaginable.

submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class ‘in words’.⁴⁷⁹

The reproduction of the relations of production is work to be performed by ISAs – religion, education, family, law, politics, unions, communications, culture, and so on.

For Althusser, the dominant ISA is no longer religion, but education: “no other Ideological State Apparatus has the obligatory (and not least, free) audience of the totality of the children in the capitalist social formation, eight hours a day for five or six days out of seven”.⁴⁸⁰ Butler emphasizes the importance of the schools as well, noting that the skills learned there “are, above all, *the skills of speech*. The first mention of ‘conscience,’ which will turn out to be central to the success or efficacy of interpellation, is linked to the acquisition of mastery, to learning how to ‘speak properly’”.⁴⁸¹ Teaching children how to speak is a particularly vital task because it is linked to the formation of guilt and conscience: I need to be able to articulate my guilt in order to feel properly guilty. Insofar as a particular ISA, acting with hegemonic force, overcodes the social and the existential with the mores of the ruling class, the reigning social-existential conditions can be tied to that ISA. I would suggest that the reigning ISA on /b/, and for troll raids in particular, is not education but communication. Instant messaging, social networking, gaming, blogging, and, indeed, trolling have spilled out of the confines of the internet. In doing so, these forms of communication are teaching users how to communicate

⁴⁷⁹ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.”

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁸¹ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 115.

effectively on a tremendously significant social forum – i.e., teaching them how to speak electronically.

Butler’s criticism of Althusser rests on his failure to account for the psyche as an element of subjectivation relatively independent of the ritual repetition of work.⁴⁸² By failing to account for the role of the psyche, or by presupposing “a prior and unelaborated doctrine of conscience”, Althusser restrains “in advance any possibility of critical intervention in the workings of the law”. The problem, Butler argues, is that Althusser’s conception of ideology is bound “the metaphysics of religious authority” in which the God that names must pre-exist the process of subjectivation.⁴⁸³ For Althusser, Christianity addresses individuals, calling them “by their names”, making them respond (“Yes, it’s me”), and making them recognize themselves as selves with a specific role to fill in the (ideologically constructed) world. All of this “is dominated by a strange phenomenon: the fact that there can only be such a multitude of possible religious subjects on the absolute condition that there is a Unique, Absolute, *Other Subject*, i.e. God”. The condition of Christian interpellation is the existence of God: the policeman/state/Bible/God must be there to conduct the hailing; some absolute other must call you before you can recognize yourself.

One curious consequence of this theologically inflected ideology is that the individual needs God to hail him or her, but God also needs the individual. Moses is the mirror or reflection of God, being made in His image, and God needs to see Moses. Ideology is a double mirror: “the structure of all ideology... is *specular*, i.e. a mirror-structure, and *doubly* specular: this mirror duplication is constitutive of ideology and

⁴⁸² Ibid, 120.

⁴⁸³ Ibid, 109-10.

ensures its functioning”. The result of this mirror structure functioning of ideology is that subjects work without coercion, “‘all by themselves’, i.e. by ideology”.⁴⁸⁴ Butler argues that this fundamental grounding of the absolute Subject is a “reversal” of the standard street scene of interpellation: instead of the subject turning when she hears the voice of the policeman, she instead actively seeks the policeman out – evidence of “a narcissistic attachment to one’s continuing existence”.⁴⁸⁵

Given Butler's arguments about the contingency of subjectivation, I would like to suggest that instating communication as the primary site of interpellation over religion helps to problematize Althusser’s conception of ideology and reaffirm that trolling demonstrates the social-existential effects of this change of ISAs. The key to this argument is in the fact that there is no “big Other” on the internet as trolls perceive it – no Subject which precedes troll subjectivity. If the parallel were to hold, then we would have to draw connections between the subject and a particular anon, and between the Subject and Anonymous. This is doubly problematic, first, because there are no particular anons in the mass of Anonymous, and second, because Anonymous does not hail. The reason for the former argument should be clear by now: in troll raids and on /b/, the individual cannot be distinguished from the multitude. Indeed, anons that identify as individuals on /b/ by posting pictures of themselves are pointedly told that they clearly “have no idea what the meaning of the word *anonymous* is”, and anons that attempt to harness the powers of /b/ for their own personal reasons (e.g. mounting a raid on someone they personally dislike) are usually told that Anonymous is not their “personal army”. The frequency with which this phrase – “Anon is NOT your personal army” – is

⁴⁸⁴ Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses.”

⁴⁸⁵ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 113.

uttered is in fact illustrative of Butler's reading of Althusserian interpellation, since running into the virtual street and asking for the recognition of the representatives of Anonymous is worse than futile, and certainly not a model for communication-governed subjectivation. The reason for the latter argument – that Anonymous does not hail – follows from this: Anonymous has no *interest* in recognizing individual anons. In fact, it has a structural interest in denying the existence of individually identifiable anons, who may be susceptible to reason and compassion, and whose compliance with moral norms might decrease the amount of lulz gained from a raid.

The symbol that the troll community most often associates with Anonymous is a black suited, headless man:⁴⁸⁶

⁴⁸⁶ The popular press associates Anonymous with the Guy Fawkes masks, of course, which gives the trolls all the more reason to insist on decapitation.



Figure 5: Anonymous⁴⁸⁷

The symbol gives even more reason to insist that the Anonymous response to ideology refuses its logic. There is no Leviathan here – or at least no rule-bound collection of rational, fearful, self-interested, atomistic individuals. Where Hobbes took this individual as the building block for his theory of sovereignty, Anonymous writes the subject out of existence,⁴⁸⁸ denying 1) that any idea of community can begin with individuals, 2) that there are “subjects”, and 3) that a theory of sovereignty, or any kind of social-scientific theory at all, can be simply applied to the internet. Although the visual representation of this non-subject is headless, this does not indicate that an analysis of Anonymous should

⁴⁸⁷ Proper attribution for this image cannot be provided.

⁴⁸⁸ Michel Foucault, writing on the death of man, puts this nicely: “I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face” (*The Archeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 17).

spurn the psychic; in fact, it suggests just the opposite: any such analysis should favour psychoanalysis over the alleged rationality of the head, since psychoanalysis provides an account of the mnemotechnical functions of guilt, conscience, and subjectivation. We associate the rational with the head, and we are told that we should bow to it, or that we should cut it off;⁴⁸⁹ Anonymous has stopped pretending that the head was ever there.

6.3: Conclusion: “I Did It for the Lulz”

Because the ideology of the religious ISA does not affect Anonymous to nearly the extent that the communicative ISA does, and because the social-existential is connected to the ideological, I have argued that troll raids help to alter the social-existential conditions in which they take place. I have further argued that raiding facilitates the extermination of feelings of guilt in the trolls that take part. Because Butler connects these aspects of subjection or power with subjectivation, I can now clarify the distinction I made at the end of the second section of the paper: the troll core of Anonymous does in fact operate in a manner which is psychoanalytically distinct from those anons involved in the Scientology protests, because although its *objet petit a* – anonymity, but more fundamentally, non-subjectivity – cannot be attained, its “presence” results in a radically different *form* of subjectivity which mocks and refuses not only guilty feelings, but the very idea of culpability. The *objet petit a* of the Scientology-protesting anons, on the other hand, is the love of mankind; it cannot be attained either, but *its* “presence” results in a traditionally Althusserian subjectivity that fails to

⁴⁸⁹ Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”.

sufficiently problematize its guilty foundation, and thus remains bound by the conscience prescribed by the dominant ideology. Here, I will agree with *Encyclopedia Dramatica*: the Scientology protesters are not “True Anon”. Butler argues that “the terms that constrain the option to being versus not being ‘call for’ another kind of response”:

Under what conditions does a law monopolize the terms of existence in so thorough a way? Or is this a theological fantasy of the law? Is there a possibility of being elsewhere or otherwise, without denying out complicity in the law that we oppose? Such possibility would require a different kind of turn, one that, enabled by the law, turns away from the law, resisting its lure of identity, an agency that outruns and counters the conditions of its emergence. Such a turn demands a willingness *not* to be – a critical desubjectivation – in order to expose the law as less powerful than it seems.⁴⁹⁰

Anonymous meets these requirements. “True Anon” *are* “willing not to be”; indeed, non-subjectivity is the object of their desire. This does not mean that they aim to will themselves out of existence entirely, but it does mean that they want to be extricated from this particular social existence.

Indeed, they may sometimes find themselves so extricated, and this may align with some of the ideas from much earlier in this dissertation: the de-individuation that takes place in Anonymous may be analogous to the de-individuation of profound boredom. In both, the subject disappears; Heidegger’s “it is boring for one” becomes “bored anon is bored”, this being uttered by “an undifferentiated no one”.⁴⁹¹ In both, the world becomes something on which we cannot act; boredom and anonymity hold us in similar states of abeyance. The problem with this argument has not changed since Chapter Three, however: the bored anon is not truly powerless in the same fashion as the profoundly bored subject. There are times when I, as a bored anon surfing aimlessly

⁴⁹⁰ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 130.

⁴⁹¹ Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 133-34.

between 4chan, Reddit, Facebook, and a host of other boring websites, have felt profoundly empty; times when I have had no possible agential recourse to the things of the internet, let alone the things of the world; times in which time itself seems to stand absolutely still. I have felt something akin to a profound boredom. Still, I have, during each of these times, failed to experience radical powerlessness or the dissolution of the division between subject and object that it is supposed to accompany. My experience alone is poor evidence of the impossibility of such a dissolution, of course, particularly since I spend less time on 4chan than the trolls whom I study, but I remain unconvinced that it is profound boredom that Anonymous experiences.

Nevertheless, in yearning for a world other than that of mainstream social media and an identity unbound by the constraints of sites like Facebook, and in creating the social-existential conditions under which that world and that identity can begin to come to pass, 4chan does establish a place where strange transformations of subjectivity take place. These may not open immediately onto Heidegger's profound boredom, but this should not actually come as a surprise: if we could reliably create the conditions under which profound boredom would obtain, we could systematize the work of philosophy, knowing that certain (im)material conditions will consistently give rise to profound thinking while others will not. It seems to me that Heidegger would disagree with this approach. It would be incumbent upon any attempt to scientifically discover the conditions under which philosophy can take place to then actively pursue the creation of those conditions – to instrumentalize identity for an end discerned in advance. This forceful approach to discovering chinks in *Ge-stell*'s armour would fall within the instrumental logic of *Ge-stell*, and would ignore the way that Being bestows itself. We

might be able to locate profound boredom on the internet – I have no doubt that a troll somewhere has experienced some approximation of the mood – but we neither can nor should attempt to institutionalize the conditions under which it has arisen.

All of this is to say that we should not hold up /b/ as a model of desubjectivation – something to which we should aspire. In addition to the ontological concerns outlined above, and at the risk of sounding like an uncritical humanist, I am more than happy to characterize some of the trolls’ actions as universally unconscionable. Schwartz begins his article by describing one particularly horrifying raid in which /b/ chose the parents of Mitchell Henderson, a seventh grader who had recently committed suicide for unknown reasons, as its target:

Something about Mitchell Henderson struck the denizens of /b/ as funny. They were especially amused by a reference on his MySpace page to a lost iPod. Mitchell Henderson, /b/ decided, had killed himself over a lost iPod.... Within hours, the anonymous multitudes were wrapping the tragedy of Mitchell’s death in absurdity.

Someone hacked Henderson’s MySpace page and gave him the face of a zombie. Someone placed an iPod on Henderson’s grave, took a picture and posted it to /b/. Henderson’s face was appended to dancing iPods, spinning iPods, hardcore porn scenes. A dramatic re-enactment of Henderson’s demise appeared on YouTube, complete with shattered iPod. The phone began ringing at Mitchell’s parents’ home. “It sounded like kids,” remembers Mitchell’s father, Mark Henderson, a 44-year-old I.T. executive. “They’d say, ‘Hi, this is Mitchell, I’m at the cemetery.’ ‘Hi, I’ve got Mitchell’s iPod.’ ‘Hi, I’m Mitchell’s ghost, the front door is locked. Can you come down and let me in?’ ” He sighed. “It really got to my wife.” The calls continued for a year and a half.⁴⁹²

I am not trying to suggest that we might construct an ethical system here – that the GoddessMine raid was “more” ethical than the Henderson raid, for instance, or that there are certain lines that cannot be crossed. What I am trying to suggest is that the *form* of Anonymous, or its lack thereof, may prove to be an instructive example of

⁴⁹² Schwartz, “Malwebolence”.

desubjectivation, and thus an instance in which the virtual boredom associated with identity and pseudonymity does not hold sway. Particular raids are, in this context, significant insofar as they exemplify or illustrate the psychoanalytic (il)logic at work in the Anonymous “body”. The Scientology protests, with their appeals to humanist values and the “body politic”, are far less interesting than aggressively anarchic raids.

I have no real reason for thinking that /b/ can lead to anything more productive than raiding and obscenity, but I nevertheless suspect that its anarchic structure contains the possibility of something other than boredom, as well as a reimagining of the ethical. Anonymous seems to be impervious to interpellation in the theoretical sense of the term, and the exact extent and effects of this are surely worth exploring – particular if, as Butler suggests, this failure of interpellation “undermine[s] the capacity of the subject to ‘be’ in a self-identical sense” or “mark[s] the path toward a more open, even more ethical, kind of being, one of or for the future”.⁴⁹³

⁴⁹³ Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 131.

Conclusion: Appearing Social

An earlier stage in the economy's domination of social life entailed an obvious downgrading of being into having that left its stamp on all human endeavor. The present stage, in which social life is completely taken over by the accumulated products of the economy, entails a generalized shift from having to appearing: all effective "having" must now derive both its immediate prestige and its ultimate raison d'être from appearances. At the same time all individual reality, being directly dependent on social power and completely shaped by that power, has assumed a social character. Indeed, it is only inasmuch as individual reality is not that it is allowed to appear.

— Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*

Social media is our latent desire for convenient distraction made manifest.

Facebook is the dream of a life lived on automatic – a place where we can see ourselves outside of ourselves as entities in connection with interesting others. It turns the self into an item of interest that can be instantaneously archived along with the other archived things of the world, and turns this collection of things into a browseable whole. Reddit is the dream of a world without boredom – a place where distractions never stop.

Accepting the browseable character of the world, it encourages its structural evaluation, ensuring that the interesting always rises to the top of the page. 4chan is the dream of the internet itself – a place where the wildness of the early World Wide Web was never tamed. Frustrated with the banality of the mainstream, it creates the anonymous conditions under which original content can come to the fore. Taken together, these sites emblemize our collective desire for the screen, and indicate that the world only *is* insofar as it *appears*.

But Facebook, Reddit, and 4chan are not monolithic in their structural effects, and their users are far from univocal. Important differences separate the one from the other.

Facebook accords best with my characterization of social media as a whole: the predominant effect of the site is the establishment of a subject who will browse and do no more. The singular identity engendered by the site, based on an informational understanding of the world, provides a simple ground for everything. At bottom, we are authentic individuals who can and should connect, and the world is something that can be known and improved. Reddit views things differently: the collective, pseudonymous character of its community generates a much more ambiguous understanding of the world. The karma system encourages the evaluation of things in part because they lack clarity, but this continual evaluation takes place according to an irrational mechanism. The ambiguous character of the world engenders nihilism and a low key mania. 4chan embraces nihilism and manic behaviors of all sorts; bent on the unadulterated pursuit of humor through collective and anonymous collaboration, 4chan's trolls, like hyenas, hunt in packs. Trolls differ from Facebook users and Redditors, being difficult to identify *as* individuals thanks to their deliberate performance of non-subjectivity. In abdicating their individuality to the alien norms of the anonymous mob, they provide evidence that parts of the internet remain wild.

These differences complicate Heidegger's description of *Ge-stell*. Once understood in the terms of the use, control, and disposal of the things of a world that stands in front of us as a reserve, I am arguing that social media encourages us to re-conceive *Ge-stell* in its terms, i.e. in an essential connection with the *virtual* boredom of the internet. I summarized the principle differences between Heidegger's *Ge-stell* and my conception of the term at the end of Chapter Three, arguing that it should be considered in terms of distraction, itself understood as the continual vacillation between

boredom and interest, and that this distraction should be understood to function ontotheologically, establishing a metaphysical ground of interest in interesting things and justifying of the value of these things through socio-technical systems. When cast in the technological terms of distraction, *Ge-stell* becomes a pre-understanding of the world as something at our disposal, or as something disposable. I used the next three chapters to draw further conclusions about the way that *Ge-stell* functions in the setting of social media.

I arrived at this re-conception of boredom and *Ge-stell* over the course of six chapters on ontotheology, boredom, technology, identity, pseudonymity, and anonymity. In Chapter One, I introduced the concept of boredom. Beginning with a quick outline of the literature on boredom, I showed that the mood is an historical phenomenon with metaphysical significance by explaining how Goodstein splits the literature on boredom into “sociological” and “philosophical” analyses and how she places Heidegger’s discussion of boredom solidly in the latter camp. While accepting the importance of her argument concerning the way that boredom illustrates a “rhetoric of reflection” in modernity, I argued that her reading misconstrues Heidegger’s conception of boredom. Because I contended that this conception would illuminate details of the mood engendered by social media, I then demonstrated how Heidegger’s argument in *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* is both “sociological” and “philosophical”, to use Goodstein’s terms, or both “historical” and “ontological”, to use Heidegger’s. This allowed me to explain the concept of ontotheology and its usefulness for the study of the mood, or attunement, of boredom.

The first chapter prepared the ground for Chapter Two, in which I moved through *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* from the perspective of the internet. In the first section of this second chapter, I explained why virtual boredom generally cannot be considered within the terms of a boredom that is bound to particular boring things. I traced Heidegger's analysis of the first form of boredom, but rather than reiterating the importance of Heidegger's example of the train station, I offered complementary examples from the net, which made it clear that the usual object-focused conception of boredom is not at all the same as the object-free boredom of the net. In the second section, I focused on the generalized act of passing the time online in order to legitimize Heidegger's claim that we are bored *with* passing the time itself rather than bored *by* any particular thing. The analysis here paid particular attention to the temporality of boredom, dwelling on its emptiness and limbo in order to illustrate how the second form is more "profound" than the first. Heidegger's description of these two principal structures is restricted to the example of a dinner party, but I demonstrated that it applies just as easily to the time that we spend online. In the third section, I discussed the form of boredom in which *it* is boring *for one*. This last form of boredom, I showed, generally does not apply to the net, but it does show us something of the existential origin of possibility. Its failure to apply to the net actually helps to reiterate the ontotheological critique of metaphysics and to illustrate how the analysis of boredom applies to "contemporary Dasein" – to the modern human being that is constituted by temporality in a complicated way. Although Heidegger's analysis is generally accurate, I argued that it is incorrect insofar as it characterizes this modern being in the terms of boredom alone.

Interest is more significant. I concluded by explaining why this “boredom” of the net, focused so strongly on the interesting, should be characterized as “virtual”.

In Chapter Three, I connected virtual boredom to technology, demonstrating that the two concepts relate to one another in an essential fashion. There can be no attunement of virtual boredom without the attitude of modern technology. By following Rojcewicz’s reading of “The Question concerning Technology” in the first section of the chapter, I showed that modern technology should be understood principally in terms of disposability: not only do we pose the things of *Bestand* in front of us for our future use, we anticipate that this use will result in an inevitable discarding. In the second section, I explained the generalization of *Bestand* into *Ge-stell*, which is the view of the world that treats everything as so disposable. Here, I argued that the character of disposability applies beyond the world of social media: the world itself becomes understood as disposable. I nuanced this account by suggesting that disposability involves more than use and discarding, arguing that the browsing and binary evaluation of content familiar from the internet inform contemporary *Ge-stell*. Continuing to follow Heidegger’s argument on technology, I raised the spectre of the “supreme danger” of *Ge-stell*, namely that this view of the world will become monolithic, while couching it in the terms of virtual boredom. Rojcewicz responds to this danger by suggesting that the recuperation of *poiesis* understood as a return to art constitutes the only saving power, but I argued that *poiesis* can be understood in much more flexible terms; that is, I claimed that we may discern the “saving power” in the “little things” of the media.

It is in the context of this connection of boredom to technology and the question of what these “little things” might be that I turned, in the second half of the dissertation,

to Facebook, Reddit, and 4chan – everyday websites that seem to be composed of nothing but little things. Given the technological character and seeming ubiquity of virtual boredom and the historico-ontological correspondence of the attitude of modern technology with individual technologies, I first asked, in Chapter Four, how virtual boredom comes to be expressed in social media. Because Facebook is the most popular English language social network site,⁴⁹⁴ and because the identifiable subject provides the metaphysical ground for modernity, I focused on how users identify themselves on Facebook. I began by demonstrating that Facebook is an ideological project designed to produce a particular kind of subject. By analyzing the public comments and projects of founder Marx Zuckerberg, former president Sean Parker, and angel investor Peter Thiel, I showed that the “open and connected” character of this subject is consonant with a modified version of Barbrook and Cameron’s “Californian Ideology”. Taking my lead from Raynes-Goldie’s work on Facebook, privacy, and ideology, I argued that the Californian Ideology relies on a cybernetic, informational conception of the world. In the second part of the chapter, I demonstrated the applicability of that informational worldview to the kind of subject Facebook actually produces by looking to the services that Facebook offers its users. At the same time, however, I noted that services like News Feed, Beacon, Connect, and Timeline produce a subject that differs in important ways from the ideological fantasies of Facebook’s luminaries, calling particular attention to the archival effects of these services. This reading enabled me to argue, in the third section of the Chapter, that the archived, and hence browseable, subject produced on Facebook aligns with the view of the world outlined in the first half of the dissertation.

⁴⁹⁴ Facebook’s popularity, in terms of numbers of subscribers, is comparable to that of QQ, a Chinese language social network site.

Additionally, however, I argued that this browseable subject suggests further modifications to contemporary *Ge-stell*: the *Bestand* of the digital archive does not stand in front of us waiting to be used, but stands waiting simply to be observed. The digital reserve is always already disposed. In this view of the world, use and control – characteristics associated with the *disposable* rather than the already disposed – become relatively unimportant.

I continued the argument concerning this “browseable” character of the internet in Chapter Five. Here, I turned to the popular news aggregating site Reddit in order to focus on how the disposable content of social media is evaluated. Where the previous chapter described the permanence of the archive of the already disposed, I used this chapter to describe the impermanence of the things of the net, highlighting the curious roles of ambiguity and pseudonymity. To make the argument, I analyzed the structures of Reddit, particularly the karma score and the upvote/downvote mechanism, in their own terms: since the binary evaluation of something on the internet as either interesting (up) or boring (down) can be characterized as a purely rational choice, I deployed rational choice theory in the second section of the chapter to illustrate that the karma system can yield irrational results. Using Bikhchandani’s, Hirshleifer’s, and Welch’s theory of informational cascades, I demonstrated that the combination of voting and commenting on Reddit generates a particularly resilient groupthink. Describing my own theory of karmic cascades, I argued that Redditors’ perception of themselves as rational entities is itself irrational: when karmic cascades reinforce themselves, they generate the sensation of rationality, making it difficult to dislodge the cascade. Furthermore, I claimed that the binary choice systems at the heart of karmic cascades are creeping across the internet. In

the third section, I turned to several strange events from Reddit's recent history to clarify how the psychological effects of the karma system become entrenched. Since Redditors have a faith in their own rationality, events in which this rationality is called into question have a destabilizing effect. Events that question the good nature of the community are even more problematic. By reading two of these events through the lens of Friedrich Nietzsche's description of apostasy and the concomitant devaluation of the world, I suggested that the swing from morality/faith to cynicism/atheism that he describes maps onto Redditors' loss of faith in their own community. I argued that many Redditors are invested in the Reddit community to the wide extent that they are because it provides an ambiguous ground on which a wide variety of things can be true. Reddit, unlike Facebook, provides the flexibility of the pseudonym and the flexibility of the merely interesting: having lost their faith in truth, Redditors are content with distraction.

Having examined two websites in which the mood of virtual boredom obtained, I turned, in Chapter Six, to 4chan, where users present themselves in a radically anonymous fashion, in order to find evidence of an alternative mood. I first suggested that we might see that alternative in Project Chanology, wherein angry, anonymous internet users came together to protest the Church of Scientology. Through a close reading of Butler's *Psychic Life of Power*, I illustrated the different ways that subject formation might take place for the members of Project Chanology, but ended up arguing that the Scientology protests on their own remained within the usual bounds of subjectivation on the particular grounds of their basic contentment with the current organization of the world. Moving to the trolls loosely associated with Anonymous, I suggested that it might be possible that these individuals should not be considered

individuals at all. Trolls adopt a much more consistent anonymity than the members of Project Chanology, spending far more time online and insisting on the laughable character of mainstream social norms. They in fact spend so much time doing this in such a deliberate fashion that they come to perform not only a different subjectivity, but the absence of subjectivity entirely. I concluded by suggesting that 4chan therefore harbours a clearer possibility of profound boredom than the other sites examined, but that there, as elsewhere, there are no guarantees.

The users of 4chan cast the contingency of identity into relief. This, I think, is the real value of the website: it shows us that we don't all have to look like Mark Zuckerberg. It shows us that "original content", to use a term that the "old fags" of 4chan hold in the highest esteem, often stems from chaos rather than order, and that its creators do not even demand nominative acknowledgement. It shows that there might be something wrong with an internet governed by Facebook alone. To broaden this out, I would suggest that this highlighting of contingency is an important response to the supreme danger posed by *Ge-stell*. My suggested modifications to the term aside, the danger that it poses remains the same – namely, that the worldview of *Ge-stell* will become a world. *Ge-stell* threatens ontological hegemony. Certain individuals and corporations are actively working to build a world in which a clean, streamlined social media connects everything seamlessly, and thereby to create a single understanding of the world. The fact that this could only take place on the basis of a universalized conception of the world as informational does not give them particular cause for worry. But it worries me. The strange virtue of websites like 4chan is that they open perspectives, offensive though they might be, from which to note the virtual character of the world.

At the third ROFLCon⁴⁹⁵ in May, 2012, Christopher Poole, the founder of 4chan, expressed a worry similar to mine. Poole said that memes, once the province of a bizarre internet subculture, have gone mainstream. It used to be difficult to access things on the net, Poole noted, but it has become easy to do so: sites like KnowYourMeme and, to a lesser extent, *Encyclopedia Dramatica*⁴⁹⁶ archive memes and make it easy to access internet culture. To put it differently, these sites make memes easily available or convenient; they place them in reserve. In the earlier days of the internet, of course, it took knowledge and effort to track down entertaining material, which entailed a certain emotional investment in the material and the culture that sustained it. Now, in the absence of effort or investment, internet culture is changing: “[m]emes were the instruments with which we used to play music. The way things are going, we’re going to lose our song”.⁴⁹⁷

The internet has grown comfortable, and so have we. We no longer look to the internet as the wellspring of a utopian future or a dystopian threat. For Nancy Baym, this is perfectly normal: enthusiasts and critics always overreact when new technologies are introduced, but society always comes to accept them – as with the alphabet and the telephone, so too with the internet.⁴⁹⁸ But as we “domesticate” the net, it loses some of the magic that it once had to captivate us, as Poole notes. The internet as a visible medium, as a thing unto itself, fades into the background, and life without it begins to

⁴⁹⁵ ROFLCon is a biannual convention that gathers major figures from internet culture together.

⁴⁹⁶ “To a lesser extent” thanks to the idiosyncratic language, deliberately misleading hypertext, and occasional spatters of gore that are the trademarks of *Encyclopedia Dramatica*.

⁴⁹⁷ Quoted by Brian Raftery, “Where Does Web Culture Go from Here? That’s the Big Question at ROFLCon III,” *Wired*, May 6, 2012, accessed May 8, 2012, <http://www.wired.com/underwire/2012/05/roflcon-iii-web-culture/#more-105006>.

⁴⁹⁸ Nancy Baym, *Personal Connections in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2010), 45.

“become unimaginable”.⁴⁹⁹ This passage from visibility to invisibility might be commonplace in the history of media, but this does not suggest that the adoption of a given technology will be without consequence. Baym is partly right: the widespread use of the internet signals neither our salvation nor our damnation. But it nevertheless changes how we see the world, and in fundamental ways. We can no more return to a world before the web than we can hope to think without the written word.

The fact of this sea change deserves comment. As this outlook becomes more and more dominant, it attains to the status of ontology. This does not take place simply because most people share the outlook; ontology is not simply the aggregation of different ways that different individuals see the world. If this were the case, we could speak simply of perspective, discourse, or epistemology. Ontology differs in the way that it structures the world. This is not to say that there is a true world informing our actions, but that we almost always live as though this were the case. History, onticity, informs ontology, but ontology nevertheless seems absolute. Ontology is the seeming of Being.

Ontology does not admit of direct contestation. The threat posed by modern technology, as Heidegger argues, is one of naturalization or sedimentation: ontology is never considered in the plural, the historical, or the contingent. Although it is all of these things, it becomes naturalized; it turns invisible, but from this position of invisibility it radically structures the conditions of possibility of experience and action. Put differently, this way of seeing the world is no longer *seen as* a way of *seeing* the world. With *Ge-stell*, or modern technology, the worldview of modern technology becomes not even a

⁴⁹⁹ Ibid.

world-view, but *the* world. With contemporary *Ge-stell*, this world is informational, convenient, and dreadfully boring.

Moralizing though this language might sound, I am not suggesting that we think about any facet of the revealing of modern technology as a “problem” to be “solved”. Casting the internet, for instance, in these terms either makes it seem like someone or something is responsible and should be held to account, leading to an instrumental view wherein we have failed to properly control technology or a substantivist view wherein the technology itself inevitably produces these consequences. The former perspective ends in guilt at our failure to properly control ourselves and our technology (often leading to a redoubling of efforts at control), and the latter ends in the passive, uncritical acceptance of the status quo. Additionally, neither perspective is adequate to the argument made over the course of this dissertation – that contemporary technology constitutes the way that Being bestows itself today. The “responsibility” for boredom and technology lies not with me, with society, or with the internet, but with Being. This is not something that can be fought

But it is something that we can prepare for. We can foster an attitude of openness toward the possibility of a different revealing by way of the attunement of the age. Being may show itself in a different light, but we will not be ready for that showing unless we are open to its possibility, or unless we are willing to become attuned to virtual boredom.

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Appendix 1: Transcript of “Message to Scientology”⁵⁰⁰

Hello, leaders of Scientology. We are Anonymous.

Over the years, we have been watching you. Your campaigns of misinformation; your suppression of dissent; your litigious nature – all of these things have caught our eye. With the leakage of your latest propaganda video into mainstream circulation, the extent of your malign influence over those who have come to trust you as leaders has been made clear to us. Anonymous has therefore decided that your organization should be destroyed – for the good of your followers, for the good of mankind, and for our own enjoyment. We shall proceed to expel you from the Internet and systematically dismantle the Church of Scientology in its present form. We recognize you as serious opponents and do not expect our campaign to be completed in a short timeframe. However, you will not prevail forever against the angry masses of the body politic. Your choice of methods, your hypocrisy and the general artlessness of your organization have sounded its death knell.

You have nowhere to hide because we are everywhere. You will find no recourse in attack, because for each of us that falls, ten more will take his place.

We are cognizant of the many who may decry our methods as parallel to those of the Church of Scientology. Those who espouse the obvious truth that your organization will use the actions of Anonymous as an example of the persecution of what you have so long warned your followers – this is acceptable to Anonymous. In fact, it is encouraged. We are your SPs [suppressive persons].

⁵⁰⁰ ChurchOfScientology, “Message to Scientology,” YouTube, January 21, 2008, accessed May 7, 2012, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JCbKv9yiLiQ>.

Over time, as we begin to merge our pulse with that of your “Church”, the suppression of your followers will become increasingly difficult to maintain. Believers will become aware that salvation needn’t come at the expense of their livelihood. They will become aware that the stress and the frustration that they feel is not due to us, but a source much closer to them. Yes, we are SPs, but the sum of suppression we could ever muster is eclipsed by that of your own RTC [Religion and Technology Center].

Knowledge is free.

We are Anonymous.

We are Legion.

We do not forgive.

We do not forget.

Expect us.

Appendix 2: Transcript of “WE RUN THIS”⁵⁰¹

Hello leaders of scientology. We are Anonymous. We hope you are having as much fun with this as we are. As you know, we are still here, and with every passing day your failure to account for the fraud and abuse exposed by our campaign becomes more evident to the media, to our government, and to your own followers. Reuters, the BBC, CNN, the London Times, Fox, the Associated Press, Forbes and a legion of local news agencies have chosen to communicate our message about your organization to their viewership. And now the world is listening to us and watching you. The mechanism behind the phenomenal ease with which we have achieved this is simple. We are speaking the truth.

Your efforts to handle this condition are as predictable as they are expensive for you. This pleases Anonymous and we encourage you to continue waging your informational war against truth at great expense to you and at no cost to us. We approve of these conditions, because within them defeat is impossible.

Our campaign has been one of constant success, and yours has been one of constant failure. This will continue. Evidence of our victory is everywhere. We are certain that YouTube and Google appreciate your handsome patronage, now necessary because of the ubiquity of our message. Unfortunately for you the hundreds of thousands of dollars you now spend every month because of Anonymous cannot change your organization’s history of crime and abuse of human rights, nor alter your organization’s policies encouraging criminal behaviour, which are now all available to the public.

⁵⁰¹ VOLSUPA, “WE RUN THIS,” YouTube, September 11, 2008, accessed May 7, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0ZFow_9vsg.

Your lawsuits to censor these documents will continue to fail at great cost to you just as your attempts to paint our peaceful demonstrations as terrorist activities have done nothing but foreground your tendency to abuse the judicial system to suppress free speech.

Defections at every level of your organization will continue to increase. By now you have most likely experienced the cognition that every action we take deprives you of at least one of the three following things: capital, clients and credibility. These conditions will continue to exert their pressure upon you and your superiors. The disorder will continue to deepen.

We have changed the rules of the game. Growth of the magnitude required to maintain your organization in its present form is no longer possible for you. Your ability to seduce the public has been destroyed. Your survival has long depended on your capacity to suppress the truth of your abuses, and that ability is now gone.

We have removed it.

Leaders of scientology, the data has spoken. We are at cause – you are at effect.

Expect this to continue, and thank you for playing the game.