

## Chapter 3

# The Ontology of the Subject in Digitalization

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter is about the ontology of subjects in digitalization. Questions of ontology emerge as a response to contemporary concerns about the ways digitalization is transforming our lives. In this chapter the author's suggestion is that any understanding of digitalization and its relationship to identity and/or subjectivity need to be considered within a more general horizon of ontology such as for instance suggested by post-representational views on the relationship between identity, self and technology (Badio 2006, Barad 2003; 2007; 2010, Heidegger 1977, Hekman 2010, Pickering 1995; 2011). The chapter highlights three broad principal responses characterizing contemporary entanglements of the self and digitalization contemporary life (Technoselves) – Disclosure, Performativity, and the Real. These three responses are each exploratory illustrated as well as theoretical bracketed by among others Heidegger's thinking on technology (Heidegger 1977). The chapter tentatively concludes that contemporary digitalization brings the subject back to fundamental ways of existence—that of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1996/1927: 49–58). As such, the author contends that any considerations regarding the ontology of the subject in the digital age need to take serious non-modern stances on existence in the search for new imaginaries of the world and the subject's becoming.*

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## INTRODUCTION

We are witnessing a shift in human attention, from physical to dynamic instances in which the digital and physical blend. Less than twenty years ago, few could even imagine that advanced social movements could appear real time on a global scale. Today, it is not strange at all that people share common grounds, socializing daily in virtual environments. Digitalization is increasingly approaching, advancing and embracing the physical, affording the virtual to everything possible to digitize (Tilson et al 2010). But as everyday things are afforded with the ability to sense its' environment – reflect location, use history, status and share information with other objects/subjects – *our experiences of the real and ourselves are altered in so many different ways*. In particular we are experiencing that we are not alone in having reflexive abilities. Rather the digital/virtual affords us increasing capacities for contemplating upon our placement in the world.

Therefore, as most of our traditional frames and tools for sense making pursuits are challenged and/or changed, the complexity of being human becomes even more overwhelming. To this point we are already quite aware as well as continuously witnessing how *our senses of ourselves are changing due to digitalization*. As such, and as will be further advanced in this chapter, if we are to understand ourselves and our becoming in contemporary life we continuously need to approach ontological questions like who are we and who are we becoming in the face of digitalization. This is also what I hold to be the role of social media and other forms of Internet of things, digital tools and services in contemporary life. But rather than regarding social media solely as self-disclosing tools and instrument I suggest that the existential dimension of social media and new forms of digitalization need to be explored. In such pursuits some other, different and/or new concepts are needed in order to direct attention to the significance of human experience in the digital

age. This chapter harbors my tentative attempt to re-direct as well as renew our approach to the ontology of the subject in a digital age.

I begin with my concern regarding that most studies of digitalization, identity and subjectivity (humanity) seems to be based on analytical distinctions between human experience on the one hand and digitalization on the other. This in turn, is often formulated in terms of whether or not there are inherent properties in digital artifacts that determine how we think and act. Also, what is referred to as significant with respect to digitalization have often been based on aspects fundamentally different from—or even opposed to—those aspects that provide people with a sense of meaning and wholeness. In my opinion, this is a limited and disturbing view that need needs to be questioned. Hence, the underlying argument, of the text in front of you, is that a focus on the ontology of the subject might offer important alternatives suggesting digitalization, as well as the lifeworld, to be examined from within itself, *as a dimension of our everyday life*.

Hence, in this chapter, it is presumed that digitalization plays a significant role configuring subjects. This is not an original idea but has, as will be advanced in the next section, been addressed by researchers, scholars and users of digital devices the last thirty years (for instance Castells 1997, Haraway 1991, Laurel 2003, Rheingold 1994, Turkle 1984, Yoo 2010). Yet, we are still inclined to make distinctions between human experiences on the one hand, and technology on the other. The contemporary philosopher of technology Andrew Feenberg (1999) explains:

*... what starts out as an analytic distinction ends up as an ontological difference, as thought technology could really be separated from society as two types of things. (Feenberg, p. xii)*

What I will be arguing in this chapter is that one of the more important changes that come with the emerging digital culture is the increased

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