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# Technology And The Tributaries Of Relational Being

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## Technology and the Tributaries of Relational Being

KENNETH J. GERGEN

My concern with historical transformations in the conception of self has its own history. Its earliest traces can be found in my 1973 essay, "Social psychology as history," where I proposed that as scientific accounts of the person enter society, so can they alter the commonly shared visions of self. Authoritative accounts of brain determination of human action, for example, can shift the way in which we understand ourselves and our behavior. The sense of self, in this case, becomes no more than an artifact of brain stimulation. And with shifts in understanding, so are the cultural mores set in motion and institutional policies transformed. Such concerns gained momentum in the later development of social constructionist theory (Gergen, 1994), and its focus on the historical and cultural lodgement of self-understanding (see, e.g., Graumann & Gergen, 1996). Most central to the present essay, however, was my 1992 book, *The Saturated Self*. This work was centrally concerned with the twentieth century emergence of communication technology and its potentials for transforming the common conception of self.

My particular focus in this work was on the Western tradition of individualism in which the origins of action are traced to psychological processes within the person. For much of Western culture, the concept of the individual self – the conscious and cognizant agent of action – is more or less accepted as a natural fact. In courts of law we hold individuals responsible for their actions; in educational settings, we hold individuals responsible for their work; in therapy we treat individual suffering; and in our democracy each individual is endowed with the right to a vote. Yet, this concept of the individual agent is also peculiarly Western and largely a by-product of cultural developments emerging in the seventeenth and culminating in the twentieth century (see, e.g., Seigel, 2005; Taylor, 1992). It is a view to which philosophers such as Descartes, Locke, and Kant

made major contributions, but that was also nurtured by the development of a merchant class, the Reformation, the ultimate development of democracy, and the conception of empirical science. Sampson (2008) and others have coined the term “self-contained” in referring to this conception of the self; elsewhere (Gergen, 2009) I have used the metaphor of “bounded being.” The main argument is that with the emergence of a new range of communication technologies, this traditional vision of the self is fading from the cultural landscape.

These developments first undermine the social supports necessary to sustain a stable and compelling view of the self. Traditional communities could be characterized in terms of their high degree of stability, reiterative communication patterns, shared beliefs and values, mutual support, and shared knowledge about the participants. With the advent of the radio, the automobile, rapid transit, mass publishing, television, jet transportation, and the Internet in particular, the traditional community has been placed in jeopardy. All of these technologies functioned to remove individuals from their location within the community. Such removals are both physical (through mass transportation, jet transportation, etc.) and psychological (through radio, television, the Internet, etc.). As workers of the nation become increasingly mobile, executives become increasingly global, and the activities of mothers and children are more widely dispersed (supermarkets, district schools, after-school activities), the population of active and available neighbors is substantially reduced.

Community dissolution is matched as well by the demise of its heart, namely the nuclear family. In many homes in the United States there are multiple televisions in the house – so that each family member can dwell in a separate symbolic ethos. There are alluring possibilities for the young to live private lives in their tech-furnished bedrooms – CD players, computer games, cell phone, amplified guitar, and so forth. There is often a family computer as well, with high competition among family members for Internet access. Many households harbor multiple laptops, so that even when they share the same dwelling, each family member can live in a separate social world, each with its own constructions of the real and the good.

Yet, we may ask, if we are witnessing the slow demise of the individualist tradition, how are we to understand its replacement? What new trajectory can we discern in the contemporary landscape of cultural life? This is scarcely a simple question and continued reflection is essential. In what follows I make a case for a shift from an individualist to a relational conception of self. However, as I propose, this shift is not unified. Rather, the general flow is constituted by a range of qualitatively different tributaries,

each related to particular developments in technology. In the present offering I sketch out three movements toward relational being: the unbounded self, the encapsulated self, and the playing self. My attempt here is not to be definitive but to glimpse movements in action, so as to better contemplate our possible futures. With these trajectories in place, it will be useful to consider the emerging conditions of cultural life that may be favored.

#### THE UNBOUNDED SELF

While the emerging technologies of communication undermine the common conception of individual, autonomous agents, they also turn attention toward relationships. By the mid-twentieth century, automobiles, radio, film, television, mass transportation, and intercontinental air travel had all opened massive new vistas of connection. "Over there" was now "in the living room." With the development of the Internet there was a radical expansion in the availability of low-cost means of learning about and/or communicating with people from around the globe. Electronic mail, websites, blogs, games, music, art, live conversations, and other resources travel around the world on an instantaneous basis. There are now well over a billion users of the Internet world wide, most of them relying on e-mail communication. In the United States, more than 70 percent of the population now relies on Internet services, and by the time it takes to read this paragraph, more than 5 million e-mail messages will have moved through cyberspace. It is estimated that today there are more than 500 million websites, with the amount of information accumulating each year equaling 30 feet of books per person for the entirety of the world's population. The average Internet user in the United States now spends approximately 100 hours a month online. More recently, however, these developments have been augmented by the massive explosion of social media. On Facebook alone there are almost 650 million visitors during any given month, twice the size of the U.S. population.

In all of these contexts new relations are formed and affective bonds often created outside one's immediate social surrounds. Increasing numbers of people come to "matter," even if this mattering is often fleeting and superficial. Each relationship may also invite subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) shifts in one's manner of being. In this sense, identity becomes fluid, shifting in a chameleon-like way from one social context to another. There is no coherent community to recognize and support an obdurate sense of identity. Rather, one's sense of self becomes subject to a multitude of tangentially related others, each of whom may bring forth and affirm a different "me." The boundary of what *is* and what *is not* self begins to erode.

There is also little reason in this context for “looking inward” to locate “one’s true self.” This once-significant question ceases to be relevant to ongoing participation in social life. The fascination with “inward depth” is replaced by curiosity in the next arrival of an e-mail message, cell phone text, or tweet. Indeed, for the newer generations the very idea of a core-self turns strange. Nor are there close companions available for reliable, in-depth explorations of the “inner region of the self.” Increasingly we are strung out across the continents, electronically and geographically mobile, and increasingly overcommitted to numerous relations, projects, and desires. As the sense of self as bounded, privatized, and centered is undone, so does the relational matrix become central to daily existence. The Enlightenment paean to individualism, “I think, therefore I am” is replaced with “I am linked, therefore I am.” This is not to say that the sense of self is fully absorbed into the relational flow. Rather, one may envision here the development of a range of partial or fragmented selves. For example, as one moves from one website to another, one is immersed in a range of contrasting realities. From the Al Jazeera website one may absorb certain Arab logics and values; from the Conservative Outpost, a dash of right-wing Republicanism; from the ACLU, the latest on the protection of free speech; from YouTube, zaniness from around the world, and so on. Nor is it simply a sense of learning in multiple worlds. In addition, one comes to appreciate many ideal ways of being. One may variously identify with a range of others who seem gifted or honorable in one form or another – in politics, pop culture, sports, religion, scholarship, and more. One’s range of aspirations expands. With this continuous expansion in the dimensions of relational engagement, the sense of a bounded and coherent self slowly gives way to a “multiphrenia” of partial and conflicted senses of self. I become a multi-being (Gergen, 2009) who brings to any situation an enormous range of potentials.

With these accretions in potentials for saying and doing, there is also an increase in one’s capacity for sensitive coordination in other relationships and similarly with millions of others around the world. The potential for effective coordination expands exponentially. The result is not only a profound increase in ongoing connectivity, but the world’s peoples also become increasingly capable of effective collaboration. And with increased capabilities, so does global organizing become increasingly effective. The small business can expand, a medium-sized business can develop markets abroad, and a large business can go global. Increased organization takes place at all levels – the community, the state, the regional, the national, and the international. There is a globally expanding network of police that parallels the expansion

of globally organized crime and terrorism. To appreciate the rate of growth in international organizing, consider that in 1950 there were estimated to be approximately a thousand non-governmental organizations in the United States with active, intercontinental programs. There are currently more than 60,000 such organizations. It should come as little surprise that there are more than 12 million websites now treating the importance of collaboration in the workplace. In effect, the unbounded self thus lends skills to forms of organizing that further expand the movement toward relational being.

Yet, we must not conclude that the future of unbounded being is altogether rosy. In the “un-bounding” there is left behind in most cultures of the world at least one of two possible traditions. For those who reside in highly individualistic societies, as in the West, the tradition of the unified and self-contained agent will continue at the edge of consciousness, whispering admonitions about one’s shallowness, spinelessness, and inauthenticity. At more painful moments, the unbounded self may be torn between allegiances, unable to make a decision. Rather than confronting oppressive forces, there may be few resources to muster in the service of resistance. And there will be desolate times when the unbounded self may feel without deep and reliable connection to anyone.

For those who issue from more collectivist cultures (often associated with the non-Western world), there is the continuing voice of one’s origin group at one’s side – whether familial, communal, ethnic, or religious. This can variously be a voice of disappointment, distrust, love, irritation, and rejection, as those who have been “left behind” do not so easily part with their members. And, as those who live an unbounded life may become aware, once immersed in the global flows of relationship, one can seldom return to the communal home with full and satisfying presence.

#### THE ENCAPSULATED SELF

A major result of communication technology has been a radical expansion in the extensity and intensity of relational life. As proposed, one significant result of this shift is the subtle replacement of the individualist vision of longstanding with a consciousness of relational embeddedness. Yet, as I have characterized this conception thus far, it is one of unbounded relations. One moves from a centered sense of self to a vision of an infinite and continuously moving engagement in relating. This view fails to take into account another significant feature of the same communication technologies, namely their potentials for arresting the flow of relationships. By this I mean that the available communication technologies also enable people

to remain insulated within cocoons of meaning. These technologies permit people to locate others who hold similar values and visions of the future. Such connections may be maintained on a continuous basis, with virtually instantaneous access. Support for one's views and values is available at every turn, giving comfort to one's perspective and/or way of life, and thus inviting one to "remain secure in the fold." As an example, anyone interested in the neo-Nazi movement, Aryanism, or white supremacy can now locate more than a dozen websites that will enable connections to form across the Western world. These sites offer various conversation groups, periodic meetings, written materials, and even a dating and mating service. One may remain easily encapsulated within the community.

Yet, although the number of Web-based communities is enormous, it is the mobile phone that demands more specific attention. As I have elsewhere proposed (Gergen, 2002) the mobile phone is of unusual importance because it is almost unique as a technology of communal restoration. It offers the possibility for continuous and instantaneous reconnection of participants within face-to-face groups. Within moments, relationships are re-enlivened, common opinions and values shared, expressions of support and mutual understanding enhanced, and knowledge of the other deepened. In a Bakhtinian sense, while most of the broadly shared technologies are centrifugal in their effects, disrupting and dispersing conventional systems of meaning, the mobile phone tends to function centripetally. It reinforces the commonalties and secures them more steadfastly. It signifies the importance of connection as opposed to autonomy, looking outward rather than inward, toward network as opposed to self-sufficiency.

Yet, this restoration of community deserves closer examination. For we are not witnessing here a re-flowering of the traditional face-to-face community. Rather, to borrow a descriptive phrase from nineteenth century Japan, we are witnessing the emergence of "floating worlds." As in the Japanese case, it is a world of social interchange that escapes the control of government and military/police authority. People are free to speak of all matters great and small, regardless of whether they are lovers exchanging sighs of longing, family members arranging a rendezvous, or drug dealers negotiating sales. It also resembles the floating world of Edo, Japan, in its functioning around an axis of petty pleasure. In large degree, mobile communication is informal, unscripted, and used in ways that enhance the pleasures of relationship (e.g., romance, friendship, family life, colleague-ship.) Lovers or spouses may call each other several times a day, using justifications that seem only to mask the enjoyment that is their aim. As Puro (2002) has described Finnish mobile phone users, they seem to "create an

obligation for talk without a reason for a talk” (p. 27). Finally, as in the Japanese case, there is no stable center of communal life. There is no specific geographical location or membership group to which the concept of community can be attached. The community is always there in a potential state, brought into being only in those moments when two or more participants are in communication.

Yet, unlike the Japanese case, the floating world of mobile phone users is not geographically grounded. The floating world of the mobile phone user is approaching the point of geographic irrelevance. Its participants may virtually be anywhere at any time. Like the hovercraft or the pneumatic rail system, they are elevated from the physical terrain; there is no specific location with which they can be identified. More broadly, it may be said that the mobile phone lends itself to the pervasive state of an *absent presence*, the continuous presence at hand of friends, family, and colleagues who are physically absent.

In effect, there are dwelling about us at all times numerous small communities that are unseen and unidentifiable. As we stroll the thoroughfare or sip coffee in a cafe their presence may be made known to us. Each mobile phone conversation is a sign of a significant social nucleus, stretching in all directions, amorphous and protean. We cannot reach out to touch the nucleus, behold it directly, or interrogate it. Yet, it may lie somewhere toward the center of importance – guiding virtually all the actions of those who are near.

I point to the importance of these interchanges because they often issue from tightly knit micro-communities. The ways in which mobile phone communication enhances and sustains group connection has been the subject of broad commentary. For example, Ling and Yttri (2002) describe the way in which the cell phone enhances “micro-coordination,” the capacity of people within the circle to adjust their actions to each other and move together harmoniously as a unit. There is also the use of the phone in what they term “hyper-coordination,” or the integration of the group in terms of emotional expressions and self-definitions. As Gournay (2002) describes it, the mobile phone moves us toward “fusional” relationships, in which “the inner circle” is vitally strengthened. As Fortunati (2002) puts it, the mobile phone is “a strong booster of intimacy among those within the social network of the user” (p. 51). With continuous communication, those within the circle can develop a high degree of mutual trust and support.

It is also important to note that the new floating worlds are nicely adapted to the demands of life in a highly complex, rapidly moving, high-tech society. This is so first because participants can rapidly obtain information from those within the circle as the demands of the day (or night)

unfold. One can obtain directions, advice, support, and the confidence of shared opinions and values. Or, if one suddenly learns or recalls information useful to another within the circle, this can be transmitted at once. This close interdependency also lends itself to micro-social fragmentation. As the small group consumes an increasing proportion of communication time, issues not inherent to group interests lose salience. As small group concerns are intensified, so are demographic divisions pressed to the margins of consciousness. The problems, challenges, and possibilities of the micro-structure diminish concerns with broad societal schisms. Micro-social concerns and conflicts become focal. In Gournay's (2002) terms, "We are seeing a desire for closure of the relational network, reduced to a few close friends and the family core" (p. 202).

Similar to the case of unbounded being, we find here an incipient diminishing of the autonomous, agentive self so central to the Western tradition. Replacing this traditional sense of self is an abiding consciousness of connection. Again, this newly emerging subjectivity is not without its problems. As Turkle (2011) suggests, participation in these social enclosures can generate a need for continuous validation. "Am I ok? Am I making the right choice here? What will they think?" One becomes helplessly dependent on social affirmation. Further, as Turkle proposes, there may be little nourishment here for what she feels are deeper needs for intimacy. Ultimately, she proposes, participants in the 24/7 world of connection may begin to look to technology itself as a replacement for human relationships.

Of course, it is difficult to fathom the trajectories that may emerge as technologies of communication develop. However, that the need for validation threatens one with a sense of helplessness is a problem only if "helplessness" itself is devalued. With continued immersion in one's bounded circles, the desired state may ultimately become that of "rocking in the cradle" of continuous affirmation. And what may seem to be "deeper needs for intimacy" may simply be a historically situated construction, slowly decaying in the new age of technology.

#### THE PLAYING SELF

In the preceding accounts of the shifting sands of self-definition – toward unbounded and encapsulated relationality – we focused on process without content. That is, we centered attention on the generalized movement away from the traditional individualist vision of the self and the emerging importance of relational being. However, there is a third direction favored by the emerging technologies that specifically centers on the content of

communication, and most specifically on play. I expand on my concerns in this case, as discussions on the unbounded and encapsulated self may be found in previous writings.

My interest in the cultural shift toward play was sparked several years ago when my morning newspaper greeted me with a front-page, banner-size headline and photo touting the dramatic win of the city's professional football team. The account of the game bristled with excitement. In smaller print at the top of the page was a report on the winning ways of a local basketball team. It was only in the nether regions of the page that I discovered reports on national and international affairs, all properly phrased in the monochromatic hues of impartial objectivity. Struck by the attention given to matters of sport, I became curious about the general content of the newspaper. Interestingly, the sports section proved to be substantially larger than the first and principle news section. The entertainment section also exceeded the size of the financial section. If I subtracted the advertisements from the pages, the portion of the paper devoted to playful matters was more than twice that of what one might call serious news. A few months later, an editorial in the paper opined that the name of this winning football team "is not only a piece of the town's history; it also conjures its essence."

This composition of the news may be commonplace in today's world. But it was not so in the world of my youth, nor it seems in previous history. My curiosity increased. Is a shift in cultural investments now in motion, and if so, is it an important one? Has play truly become the dominant cultural activity? A scanning of statistics on professional sports in the United States was provocative: In professional baseball for a recent season, the gross revenues reached a record-breaking \$7 billion. As the Major League Baseball Commissioner, Bud Selig, announced, "This is the golden era for the sport, and given the (weak) economy this may be the most remarkable year we ever had. We're at numbers nobody ever thought possible." Paid attendance at the games was more than 73 million. For professional football, the revenue that year was almost \$8 billion, with 26 million paid fans and a television audience of at least 500 times this number. Then there are the basketball and hockey seasons to consider, among others. Considering the professional sports industry in the United States altogether, the gross revenues in 2010 reached \$414 billion. This figure exceeded the total revenues of the combined governments of Costa Rica, India, Lithuania, Bolivia, Chile, Finland, Morocco, Romania, and Pakistan during the same period. And all this was to say nothing of the lively interest in golf, tennis, auto racing, and soccer, along with, skiing, casino gambling, horse racing, gymnastics, skateboarding, online gambling, televised poker, and fantasy sports.

However, the most dramatic developments are surely in the virtual world. A homely example is revealing, important as well in suggesting that the shift toward play is not solely an American phenomenon: When visiting friends in the Netherlands, I was told that they were to entertain their grandchildren for the afternoon. Later, the two boys, three and five, burst into the house, and without more than a nodding acknowledgment of the assembled gathering, raced up the stairs. Their destination: the two computers in the upstairs office. Within minutes they were both absorbed in online games. They were allowed to remain so for an hour, at which point cruel grandmother pulled the switch. It was human time again. Such an event will scarcely be surprising to any young parents. At the present time, there are now more than 200 million web-sites related to computer games. One of these sites, chosen at random, offers 1,500 games, and has more than 70,000 participants. Another offers games in more than 40 languages. Players on the MMOs (massively multiplayer games), such as those featured on Facebook and other social network sites, cater to more than 100 million participants a year. The participants spend more than \$1 billion annually. Video games, such as those sold for Xbox, garner far greater income. Revenues of video games now exceed \$20 billion internationally. More than 20 million players have spent 17 billion hours on Xbox Live, which is more than 2 hours for every person on the planet. Another 40 million users have registered PlayStation Network accounts.

Among the major characteristics of games, as defined by scholars such as Huizinga (1938) and Caillois (2001), are that they are non-income-producing activities, non-obligatory, and circumscribed in space and time. Further, as they see it, there are rules of participation (either explicit or implicit). Participation, in turn, evokes an alternative reality, a reality that has the capacity to enchant or captivate. Defined in this way, it is legitimate to include within the cultural shift toward play, the shared indulgences in TV drama, movies, YouTube, online porn, pop music, romance novels, and social networks. As Timmermans (2010) and Pearson (2009) both describe, online activities such as these are essentially playful. We may, then, distinguish among three forms of play. First there is *Social Play*, constituted by the vast majority of communication taking place in social networks. Communication in this context not only creates a playful ambience, but is also a site on which people communicate about both spectator and participatory play, thus enhancing their significance. Second, there is *Spectator Play*, constituted by the vast range of spectator pleasures, as facilitated by television, movies, magazines, newspapers, and radio. Finally there is *Competitive Play*, made up of the enormous range of participatory competitive games, both electronic and organic.

Let us characterize the general shift in cultural investments of attention, time, and money in these three spheres in terms of *Playland*, denoting a world in which the dominant cultural activities – along with the meaning these activities give to life – center on participation in various forms of play. If this lens for viewing cultural life carries legitimacy, numerous questions follow, concerning, for example, the reasons for this historical shift; its effects on families, communities, and nation; its implications for education and governance; and so on. However, my chief concern here is the implications of life in playland for the ways in which we come to understand ourselves, and the meaning of our lives.

At the outset, one might well be inclined to see in this movement an extension and intensification of the agentive “I.” One might surmise that most games celebrate the individual strategist, who aspires to success; who vanquishes; and who trains, plans, schemes, and carries out tactics for purposes of winning. In the process of playing, personal agency is reified; individualism is refurbished. Certain gaming structures certainly lend themselves to such a result, but in general, I am not persuaded. Consider again the three forms of cultural play: social play, spectator play, and competitive games. It is in the context of social play that my case for the erosion of the bounded self and the coming of relational being was significantly based. E-mail, Facebook, cell phones, Twitter, and the like all immerse us in the co-constituting process of communication. In each case, our actions are inherently “for the other,” and without the other they lose meaning altogether. To abandon all of one’s interlocutors would eviscerate one’s sense of self. On the level of spectator pleasure, there is also a diminishment of the agentive “I,” but the route is different. In this case the dominant pleasure is taken from the process of identification, particularly the spectator’s fantasized narrative of self as the player. Because the drama of games is one typically featuring success versus failure or good versus evil, the potential for games to generate heroic figures is great. Movie and television dramas yield a similar panoply of “gods” and “goddesses.” As a spectator, the identification process may remain wholly in fantasy. However, the fantasies also carry over into purchasing apparel fetishizing the hero, or adopting the hero’s mannerisms, gestures, or ways of life. The important point is that when immersed in spectator pleasures, one brackets the sense of authentic being. One lives temporarily as the other.

In both of these conditions we find an alteration in consciousness, from the traditional sense of “I am the master of my actions” to an “out-of-self” condition; in the former case, “I am an actor for others” and in the latter, “I experience as the other.” Let us view these as subtle movements in terms of

the emergence of a *second-order self*, a sense of self as other than self, or a state of para-being. On the more extreme level, the sense of a second-order self may characterize one's condition under the influence of a drug, or when sexually aroused, romantically infatuated, or fully immersed in a stage role. One is fully compelled by activities that might be described as ego-alien. These activities spin out spontaneously, without deliberate thought, and often surprisingly. Now consider the case of competitive games: I watch as my twelve-year-old grandson sits in a special chair designed for online gamers. The chair approximates the seat of a jet fighter pilot or a motorcycle driver. His eyes are fastened on the television screen, his hands grip precision controls for the events unfolding before him, and the booming sounds of these clamorous events bellow from nearby speakers embedded in the chair. This is not "John, my studious grandson, with polite manners, tidied room, and careful eating habits." That John is absent, now replaced by a rampant killer, emptying bullets into dark figures lurking in shadows or leaping from doorways, casting grenades across barriers to see bodies torn to bits, moving ever forward to slay as many combatants as possible. This is the intoxication of a second-order self. All the frustrations, ambiguities, complexities – along with the possible emptiness – of daily life are removed. One lives a thrilling life as a hero with a thousand lives, but returns to the dinner table as dutiful son.

To be sure, this is a dramatized account, and it is clearly more relevant to some forms of participatory games than others. But virtually all competitive games invite one – for however long an amount of time – to become a second-order self. The increased presence of second-order being might not be so important in itself. To play tennis or golf once or twice a week probably has little impact on the remainder of one's life. One plays, and when play is terminated, one returns to everyday demands. However, a closer examination is required. There is now substantial literature in the human sciences – from the late nineteenth century to the present – proposing that one of the major influences on human development is imitative role-playing. In their play, children imitate their parents, for example, and in playing out these roles their personalities and potentials are shaped. In the same way, in entering a profession one imitates the behavior of other professionals and attempts to play the role of the professional.

Of special importance to the present chapter, it is out of these processes that one's sense of self emerges. In being other, one becomes oneself. Play gives way to a sense of obdurate identity. Consider again the emergence of playland: Activities in social networks, as we have seen, invite playing with one's identity; spectator activities invite imitation of players; and with

competitive games one indeed becomes the player. With sustained and intense participation in playland, the conditions are in place for the emergence of a genuine *playing self*. The sense of a second-order self gives way to a first-order one: "I am a player."

As the sense of the playing self gains strength, so do states of authentic being become suspect. To create a series of avatars or game identities poses little problem; with chameleon-like ease, one fits congenially into the game at hand. Within the individualist tradition, with its emphasis on authenticity, one might *choose* to play, depending on the outcome; however, as a playing self, one is simply playing without asking questions of outcome. In the same way, one does not choose to breathe the air; breathing is just the nature of life. For the playing self, one who calculates daily decisions about work and play may seem naïve. To fancy oneself as a rational agent, carefully weighing the outcomes of a decision is foolish: "Don't you know it's all a game?" Richard Rorty's (1989) conception of the *liberal ironist* is apt. For Rorty, propositions about the real and the good are without rational foundations. Yet, those realizing that this is so may nevertheless commit themselves to relieving suffering in the world. They commit to liberal causes, understanding full well that there are no knock-down arguments for doing so, no foundations for commitment. In the same way, in taking issues of life seriously, the playing self understands that they are not serious. Or as Oscar Wilde would put it, "Deep down he is superficial."

As the playing self emerges in cultural life, what are the implications for daily life? What is worth doing; on what kind of narrative journey is one embarked? To treat such issues we obviously broaden the realm of interpretive complexity. As commentators we are immersed in the very processes about which we write; we grapple with understanding a condition that is not, for us, an object of observation. The hope, however, is that in the grappling we generate resources for collectively navigating our way. With this said, it is my view that with the playing self, the strong individualist account of human functioning recedes. One does not ask, in the abstract, "what would I like to be?" and look inward for the resources to reach this self-determined end. Rather, one recognizes that one is forever functioning within a relational context, with other players, with rules and expectations, and with offerings of what is possible and what is precluded. One may ask about preferred ends within a context, but there is no meta-contextual location from which to take a stand. The playing self is relationally dependent. This does not mean confronting a prefixed world, where one can only play within the boundaries of tradition. On the contrary, because one understands that one comes into being through playing, and that the

games are created by players, then new games are always possible. All that is required is another player responding enthusiastically to the invitation, “let’s imagine that ....”

The life course for the playing self is thus indeterminate. As Timmerman (2010) proposes, in the digitalized contexts of the game world the vision of a coherent life narrative is no longer compelling. The latter vision is a by-product of a textual world. In effect, the playing self is ideally adapted to the technologically driven ethos in which change is continuous and rapid. Living disjunctively is not, then, unsettling. Rather, the infinite possibility of new and exciting life-games is optimistic and energizing.

Does the playing self thus lack moral fiber; is this a spineless creature for whom anything goes? I do not think so. Rather, one’s existence as a playing self requires the presence of a game, and games require for their existence rules of conduct. These rules, in turn, contain values – what it is to win and lose, to succeed and fail, to play fairly or unfairly. As mentioned earlier, most video games are based on a narrative in which heroes are pitted against villains. Thus, a world of virtue is built into both the content and structure of the game. Extrapolating to life outside the game, the playing self would be prone to a *situated ethics*. He or she would be sensitive to local moralities, but would be resistant to transcendent moral principles. This does mean that because the rules of a game are ultimately arbitrary, and one ultimately plays to win, situated ethics may run thin. Whether on Wall Street, the battlefield, or in the neighborhood, if winning is at stake, little else matters. Bending the rules may be a pervasive temptation, with little investment in grappling with issues of moral ambiguity or integrity.

#### THE FUTURE IN VIEW: BETWEEN PERIL AND PROSPERITY

In the preceding account my special concern has been with three contemporary forms of self transformation. All three of these have in common a strong link with, on the one hand, the profusion of communication technologies, and on the other, a shift away from the traditional Western vision of independent and agentive selves. Favored in all cases is a movement toward a relational sense of self. However, depending on the form of technological immersion, three different accents of the relational self can be detected. Roughly speaking, dependency on social media, including the World Wide Web and e-mail, favor a sense self cast on a sea of unbounded relationship. In contrast, a dependency on mobile communication, invites a more encapsulated sense of relationality. One’s identity is cemented to the small enclave of interlocutors. Finally, immersion in electronic games

and related media and networks favors a sense of a playing self. One loses identity in the ongoing process of “the game.” To be sure, these are analytic categories, scarcely representing the possible overlaps, synergies, and vast sectors of a non-participating public. The attempt here has not been to be inclusive but to offer resources for reflexive dialogue.

It is also important to note that although communication technologies are surely an important factor in such transformations, their reverberations do not occur in a historical vacuum. Their ramifications are supplemented by several additional movements. There is, for one, the impact of global organizing. Although itself drawing from technological developments, movements toward globally organizing business, science, sports, scholarship, religion, and so on place a strong demand on collaboration. Increasingly, participants in such movements find their future depending not on the traditional virtues of self-reliance, character, and autonomy, but on participating harmoniously and effectively in groups. In addition to globalization, the growing consciousness of environmental catastrophe also places a major stress on relationship. In the face of global warming, atomic power production, species eradication, dwindling water resources, and the like, we confront a choice between productive collaboration and catastrophe. The efforts of isolated individuals are insufficient. There are no land masses that are exempt from environmental threat. In effect, we realize that a viable future depends on the collaborative capacity of the world’s peoples.

Although the forces favoring a relational consciousness of self are prevalent, continuing discussion is also essential concerning the implications for cultural life. Many may lament the erosion in individualism, once regarded as the cornerstone of American democracy and productivity. Others will be concerned with the threats to traditions of individual responsibility and possible tyrannies of the collective. At the same time, a growing number of critics have explored the corrosive impact on individuals and society of what they view as the ideology of individualism (Bellah et al., 1985; Lasch, 1979; Leary, 2004; Sampson, 2008). As many see it, when the individual agent is held to be the fundamental atom of society, we set the stage for narcissism, selfishness, alienation, loneliness, self-doubt, and antagonism. Further, we develop institutions in which competition, judgmental evaluation, and hierarchy prevails. When we hold that it is fundamentally a world of “all against all,” we lean toward global distrust. In this context, movements toward relational conceptions of the self are much to be welcomed. They form a promising alternative to the individualist tradition, one that might form an invaluable resource as we move toward global interdependency.

Yet, in my view, there are distinct differences among these three trajectories in terms of future promise. As we move into a world in which multiple perspectives, values, and ways of life are increasingly thrown into confrontation, we enter a space that is both dangerous and pregnant with potential. On the one side, within any reality-making enclave we now have the technological potential to find 24/7 support. If invested in a religious, ethnic, political, or business enterprise, for example, our chorus of affirmation is never further than a click away. One's vision of reality, or commitment to a way of life, need never be questioned. As a result, there may be crystallization and an accompanying resistance to any alternative reality or way of life. Such resistance may also give way quite rapidly to animosity and its deadly sequelae. We recognize this condition in the dead-end political conflict infecting our government, no less than in the religious strife now dominating the globe. When carried to an extreme we move toward a new level of "all against all," one with devastating consequences.

At the same time, we also recognize that the chief origins of innovation lie within the hybridization of cultures or subcultures. To sustain a given tradition of reality-making is to circumscribe the possibilities for action. In bringing traditions together, not only are possibilities expanded, but new combinations also become apparent. In effect, invention is largely a byproduct of relationship (cf. LeFevre, 1987; Montuori & Purser, 1999). Closely related, Chua (2007) has argued that the golden ages in many cultures of the world occur when their various minorities can be brought into collaborative working relations. In short, this is to say that if means can be found to soften the boundaries among various groups, to explore affinities, to appreciate multiplicities, and to prize the process of collaboration, we may move in the direction of unprecedented global well-being.

In these terms, what is to be said of the three trajectories described in this chapter? All of them move toward dissolving the tradition of the autonomous, self-contained individual. All move toward a greater appreciation and investment in relationship. In this sense, all three could contribute to the more promising alternative just described. Yet, there are significant shortcomings represented in both the trajectories of encapsulation and play. In the former case, the individual becomes immersed within the reality and values of a circumscribed group. Everything outside may become either irrelevant or threatening. The potential for integrating multiple perspectives is diminished. In the case of the playing self, one sacrifices autonomous selfhood for participation in the relational world of the game. Yet, every game also functions as a bounded world within itself. And in the case of games, these are worlds generated by others, typically

for commercial purposes. Thus, the playing self may move with ease across the span of game-worlds. However, there is little invitation here to appreciate or participate in alternative worlds – in their terms.

In terms of world futures, it is thus the general and uncontrolled immersion in technologies of communication that may offer the best hope for future well-being. Most valued is the individual who moves freely across various spaces of relationship, absorbing from all, and emerging as a multi-potentialed hybrid. The relational nomad will suffer losses – longing sporadically for the valued traditions that he or she is simultaneously rendering obsolete. Yet, given the technologies for creating new forms of life, these explorers of the new social space may just possibly generate life-giving and life-sustaining alternatives.

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