

“Being Online” Special Issue - Editors’ Introduction

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“Questioning builds a way” Heidegger (1952/1977) p. 3.

Many times, in education, we are focused on a “way:” on the right “way” to be helpful, on the appropriate “way” to work with someone, on an effective “way” to teach a topic. It often feels like the answers are a long “way” off. Heidegger’s way, however, is not as much about reaching a goal or outcome as it is about being “underway;” it is more about travel than arrival. At least this is what is suggested in the active role of the term “questioning” in Heidegger’s formulation. As Heidegger uses the term, questioning does not involve certainties or even specific answers; and as Heidegger’s student, H.G. Gadamer, once observed: “The essence of the question is to open up possibilities and keep them open” (2000, p. 299).

This special issue of *Phenomenology & Practice* also hopes to point toward one or more possible “ways” for thinking about “Being Online.” This special issue is devoted to the questions, using the phenomenological description and exploration of the experience, of being online in educational or pedagogical contexts. The authors brought together in this issue take up this work and many of the personal, pedagogical and existential experiences and implications that come with it. They engage in hermeneutic phenomenological writing to create texts that serve to bring sensitivity to the lifeworld experiences associated with computer and Internet technology, and the complex interplay of distance and proximity, alienation and integration that these experiences can entail. O’Donohue explains:

Some forms of technology extend human presence over great distance and bring the absent one nearer; the telephone and fax machine do this. Most technology, however, attempts to explain life in terms of function. Increasingly, when we approach something new our first question is about how it functions. Our culture is saturated with information, which stubbornly refuses to come alive with understanding. . . We learn to close ourselves off, and we think of our souls and minds no longer as a presence but more in terms of apparatus and function. (O’Donohue, 1999, p. 75)

Each paper included in this issue clearly moves beyond function to situate technology in the lifeworld, often, almost insistently, in the context of the relations of self and other. They inquire into the nature of such relations by asking about care, about the inter-twining of presence and absence, and of difference and identification, to name just a few pertinent themes.

The issue begins with care, an essential aspect of Heidegger’s notion of *Mitsein* or “being-with.” Ellen Rose and Catherine Adams’s exploration of these themes centers on the online postsecondary teachers’ correspondences and relations with their students. They ask: “Are our

understandings of... pedagogical care and responsibility ...readjusted when ...the instructor is potentially within reach anytime, anywhere?" Building on Heidegger's notions they further ask how their "relationship of care and solicitude in which instructors and those with whom they form caring relationships are revealed?" Drawing from Heidegger's work on technology as "standing reserve" as a way of viewing or regarding the world, they continue... "Or are online teachers' relations with students more akin to this notion of... the technological attitude, in which the world and the beings in it increasingly show up as resources, available to be ordered and used in ways that will fulfill instrumental intentions and desires?" Their questioning leads not to a ready answer, but to increasingly urgent and pointed questions: "As more and more of their relationships with students are mediated by online systems, will it become increasingly difficult for postsecondary instructors to experience care?" Or "will the meaning of care morph to accommodate what is possible... within the bounds and capabilities of asynchronous online systems?" Such questions point to the ways in which in technology and basic human experiences converge and become inseparable.

Norm Friesen's work takes as its starting point the distinction or questioning that separates "tele-presence" from "tele-absence." The technology in question here is videoconferencing, a medium that is becoming increasingly commonplace (think of "Skype" or "FaceTime") but whose educational implications are little studied. Friesen reflects that in these and other technically mediated contexts, "[o]ne's openness for communication tends to be managed or signaled in highly controlled ways... You pick up the ringing phone and say 'hello?' or You see a green highlight beside those who are logged in (with you) via Facebook or Gmail." That which is mysterious or requiring further questioning for Friesen is not so much the (at times frustrating) superficiality of these signals, but the ambiguities of embodiment and attention that underlie them. Presence and absence, availability and distraction, connection and separation are not "pure" and diametrically opposed states in many relations, but are instead articulated in finely differentiated degrees through our embodiment and the situations it always entails.

For Derek Tannis, phenomenological inquiry opens up a site for the examination of the lived experience of international students' help seeking in their technology use. Through the guidance of Gadamer, Heidegger and Ihde, Tannis explores aspects of (sometimes radical) cultural difference in this context. He looks unflinchingly at the feelings of frustration, inadequacy, despair and even hopelessness that engagement with obscure and sometimes obdurate computer technology can elicit. He considers the multitude of individual circumstances and backgrounds that can lead international students into these emotional straits. The response that he recommends, however, is not one of categorizing and directly anticipating these situations, but of sensitizing help-giving personnel to a wide range of possibilities. It involves exercises focusing on possible experiences, on imaginative identification and empathy with those who enter the Western campus as already radically "othered." Tannis adumbrates a broadly phenomenological way to encourage receptivity and responsiveness among those who are to answer urgent and volatile calls for help.

Catherine Adams continues the exploration of being online through the phenomenon of naming. She explains: "Educational research has continued to explore the value anonymity and pseudonymity to learning, but few studies have explicitly attended to "onymity," the experiential significance of using one's own and others given or proper names in online courses." Her reflection begins with a consideration of phenomena of anonymity, identifiability and pseudonymity in online contexts. The connection between a name and an individual is one that appears quite arbitrary from the outside, but that is a "non-negotiable" necessity in most

relations. To forget or mistake someone's name is tantamount to forgetting the person him or herself –rendering the person forgettable or interchangeable. It is this arbitrary but singular bond between the physical person and name put into question online and that is the centre of Adams' inquiry. She asks: What do students or teachers “really ‘see’ when they first encounter the names of ... [others] online? Who is the “who” with whom we correspond online?”

Norm Friesen brings this issue to a close with a reflective review of Waldenfels' “responsive phenomenology of the alien.” The alien, as Friesen explains, is fundamentally different from “the other” as the latter has been delimited in phenomenology and the Western philosophical tradition generally. It is not another self, nor is it symmetrically opposed to the self. Instead, as the word suggests, it is the opposite of what is familiar or comfortable; it is something that escapes or withdraws from our “sphere of ownness,” to use Waldenfels' words. At the same time, such “alienness” is always with us by virtue of its repression and exclusion. We cannot “know” or “identify” the alien in this sense, we can only respond to its irruption – which Waldenfels sees as exemplified in the “question:” For him, this is a form of address which cannot be reduced to a predictive or predicative logic. In concluding this review, Friesen addresses the theme of this special issue, and also revisits a theme in his previous contribution to it by looking at Waldenfels' speculations on telepresence and tele-absence: It is the alien and its withdrawal and absence, as it turns out, that Waldenfels sees as a key challenge for such technologies of “presence.”

Conclusion

This overview of Heidegger's “way” as loosely connecting the pieces collected in this issue would be incomplete and disingenuous without a recognition of other, quite recent concerns associated with it. The editorial work on this special issue of *Phenomenology & Practice* took place during the release of and brief debate on Heidegger's aptly titled *Black Notebooks*, originally written between 1931 and 1941. Anyone with passing familiarity with Heidegger's biography, or who has read Heidegger's *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953), will at least know of his ill-timed German nationalism or of his strained relationships with some of his Jewish compatriots. However, the recent publication of his *Black Notebooks* has reframed these issues, bringing them into clear connection with his philosophy. These revelations have been seen by some scholars as marking the point at which we should “rethink, from scratch, what his work was about” (Thomas Sheehan, as quoted in Schuessler, 2014).

These *Notebooks* show how Heidegger's anti-Semitism and National Socialist sympathies, which might have been earlier seen (but hardly excused) as tentative, petty or personal, are linked by Heidegger himself to the core of his conceptions of modernity and technology. This is particularly the case for his anti-Semitism. In statements not yet translated into English (to our knowledge), Heidegger speaks of the “tenacious destiny (*zähe Geschicklichkeit*) of calculation and writing” that forms the “ground of [world] Jewry” (*Judentum*; elsewhere *Weltjudentum*). This ground, according to Heidegger, is simultaneously a kind of “worldlessness” (*Weltlosigkeit*), which in Heidegger's (and his student H.G. Gadamer's) conceptual vocabulary reduces Jews to the ontological level of speechless animals. This is a condition, a void, Heidegger continues, “to which nothing can be bound,” and which simply “instrumentalizes everything for itself (*alles sich dienstbar macht*; all as translated from Wenzel, 2014). The responsibility of the German nation, as Heidegger indicates in sentences already translated (see Schuessler 2014), is to fight against this tenacious destiny.

The clumsily mixed metaphors do little to distract from the central point: Relentless modern quantification and instrumentalization, Heidegger is saying, finds its epitome in “World Jewry,” and as such, should be repelled. Disturbing enough on its own, this also raises further unsettling questions: To what other conclusions might this “way” of thought and reflection lead? And what are we doing when we would follow Heidegger in it?

Over the decades, this “way” has appeared increasingly equivocal and evasive –if not also perilous or even repugnant. Like the ambivalent *Holzweg* of which he was fond, Heidegger’s “way” must at the very least be recognized as *not* simply heading to a revelatory clearing, but possibly toward a kind of philosophical cul-de-sac (Young & Haynes 2002, p. ix). Even more worryingly, it may entail a kind of confusion of the former with the latter.

With these caveats in mind, we return to Heidegger’s own warnings: “We shall never experience our relationship to the essence of technology so long as we merely conceive and push forward the technology, put up with it, or evade it.” This relationship will always be disguised as long as we “regard technology as neutral[,] because then we are given over to it in the worst possible way” (1952/1977, p. 4). Recognizing the reality of Heidegger’s other remarks regarding the character of technology and instrumentality, we can (with some caution) still say that we need to seek to understand the “ways” in which we may (or may not) give ourselves over to technology. This special issue represents an attempt to contribute this task, and in so doing, the studies presented here suggest a multiplicity of “ways” of being online.

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