Ethics of Identity in the Time of Big Data

Ethics of Identity in the Time of Big Data
25th Annual International Vincentian Business Ethics Conference (IVBEC), 2018
Center for Global Business Stewardship, St. John's University, New York City
James Brusseau, Philosophy, Pace University NYC
jbrusseau@pace.edu

Abstract
According to Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, big data reality means, "The days of having a different image for your co-workers and for others are coming to an end, which is good because having multiple identities represents a lack of integrity." Two sets of questions follow. One centers on technology and asks how big data mechanisms collapse our various selves (work-self, family-self, romantic-self) into one personality. The second question set shifts from technology to ethics by asking whether we want the kind of integrity that Zuckerberg lauds, and that big data technology enables. The negative response is explored by sketching three ethical conceptions of selfhood that recommend personal identity be understood as dis-integrating. The success of the strategies partially depends upon an undermining use of big data platforms.

Keywords
Big data, surveillance capitalism, social media, personal identity

Serial identity as common and practical requirement

One of the ways I stay out of jail is by changing who I am. A father in the morning, a lecturer in the afternoon, a husband in the evening: it's one face strapped on, then another, and another.

This constant dissociation from the person I just was isn't optional. Were I to treat my children as colleagues, I'd fail as a father. If I approached the women at work as my wife, I'd end up incarcerated. So, it's an idiosyncratic truth that a normal day requires schizophrenic personalities.

Familiar questions rise here. Does a unifying self subsist within the variety? In what form? How found, how made? Philosophical investigations have been ongoing for 2500 years, without much progress, which hasn't mattered because the real world – the one where you and I actually live as multiple personalities – hasn't *forced* any decisions.

That's changing though.

Objection to serial identity: Integrity/Zuckerberg

Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg insists

> You have one identity. The days of you having a different image for your co-workers, and for the other people you know, are coming to an end. Having two identities for yourself is an example of a lack of integrity.[1]

There are two claims here. Empirically, quotidian multiple identity is diminishing. Ethically, that's good.

The empirical claim gets traction on Facebook where integrity aligns with the concept of *authenticity*, which is key to the platform's content policing. You're allowed to post words and pictures that are humorous or serious, true or false, amiable, romantic, professional. Anything goes, *as long as* it's authentic, which means the poster employs a real name, and has a single account. Selected users are even privileged to receive the blue verification badge, signaling administrative refutation of any duplicity. With or without verification, though, authenticity dovetails with integrity: you're meant to be one person on the site.

Big data forcing integrity

Everywhere on digital social media, the gathering force of integrity and authenticity is palpable. Children and parents feel appalled by each other's Facebook walls. Husbands and wives leer at each other's text messages. Friends and coworkers anxiously scan each other's Instagrams. Viscerally, there's an understanding that it's increasingly difficult to divide our lives and compartmentalize our identities.

But that's not where the real integrity pressure is applying.

The big push comes when third party companies with unfamiliar names including Acxiom, acquire all the data Facebook, LinkedIn, Tinder and the rest can gather, and add geographic information accumulated by your cell phone provider, as well as recent purchases documented by your credit cards, and then scoop up public data sets, like the recent New York City Open Data initiative, and finally combine it all to form universal profiles assigned to each one of us. This digital bundling churning in the background of all our lives is the *real* action defining big data integrity, and the deep reason the days of having different images for co-workers, friends, and families are coming to an end. It's not just that a lot of people are on Facebook, it's that electric information gathering unites our work life (LinkedIn), and our romantic life (Tinder), and everything in between.

So, an embarrassing picture snapped by a jilted lover on a distant vacation gets scraped from 4chan, associated with a face, tagged with a name, bundled with related images and words, sold to a human resources service, and ends up flashing on an employer's screen. A termination notice follows. The identity we live at work, in other words, gets forced together with who we are on vacation.

It can only be a matter of time before Tinder finds a way to add credit scores and income numbers to its pictures and profiles. It has already happened that Target stores announced a young woman's pregnancy to her family before she could. In fact, the store may have known the motherhood identity before the mother did.

The term for all this in the trade is *identity resolution*. And the fact that there *is* a term, and there *is* a trade, is this essay's first conclusion. It demonstrates how difficult it's getting to *not* be who we are. It used to be that employers didn't know what we did after hours. And it used to be that romantic seduction meant strategically revealing – and concealing – parts of who we were. And it used to be that we were parents for some people, and friends for others, and patients for the doctor, and women and men for each other. Not anymore.

Finally, it used to be that integrity and authenticity were thought experiments lighting up philosophy classrooms before suffering abandonment for a trip to the bar, or a

summer touring Europe, or employment in a glass office building. Now, though, the questions tag behind each one of us, pulling as inescapably as our trails of data.

Integrity ethics

Do we *want* integrity?

Zuckerberg answers yes, and there's solid moral ground beneath him. Being two-faced, or multiple-faced, can be rupturing in the sense that I contradict who I am: my existence conflicts with itself.

This essay goes in the other direction. It explores an ethics where our selves seek multiplication instead of integration. Inauthenticity is the virtue, while authenticity is a vice. Disassociation incarnates identity, while resolution is spurned.

Here are three ways of taking this line.

1.

Discontinuity can be conceived as *natural* element of human existence, as opposed to an aberration or psychological illness. Gilles Deleuze's example of the rhizome plant stem[2] corresponds here as the affirmation that tastes, aspirations, fears and desires can cut away from personal information already accumulated to describe who we are.

It happens every summer that people depart for backpacking or bicycling travel, and intuitively discover that they can create themselves as whomever they wish for encountered strangers. Of course, the fact that no one is running background checks on their fellow night-train riders doesn't automatically convert everyone into vivid explorers of experiences they wouldn't engage were their friends watching, but, every season there are a few who cut away. Maybe they meet someone who engages with a different language, or an incompatible value hierarchy. Whatever the particulars, if becoming foreign is natural – an organic part of human being - then it may be that we are biologically or neurologically suited to outrun facial recognition technologies and accompanying data streams that constantly remind us of who we're supposed to be.

A maximum and well-chronicled example would be the late 19th century voyager Isabelle Eberhardt,[3] but if you visit the travel section of the local bookstore, you'll

find volumes written by people you've never heard of, all telling the same story about converting abroad into someone whose new personal data can't be resolved with the old.

2.
Privacy can be reconceived. Instead of an immobile repository of personal data requiring safeguarding, it is nomadic and escapist.

Privacy advocacy is *defensive* when assuming that our defining traits, numbers, orientations, and impulses are contained, motionless, and vulnerable, and therefore require protection or concealment. Legally, this attitude underwrites Europe's recently promulgated data privacy laws. Technologically, the attitude is expressed as the privacy-by-design movement.

Against this approach, there's the space of private information conceived *not* as existing first, later to be filled with personal details. Instead, when we create details about ourselves, a new space of privacy opens around them. Privacy *is* a container of personal information, but the container *follows* the information. Our private region consequently migrates as new personal data is produced. For that reason, protection and concealment are no longer necessary. When personal data is compromised, we simply move on.

Religious belief, for example, is a critical element of an intimate profile, and any time someone converts to a new faith they're *constructing* personal data. The space of their identifying information subsequently shifts, and any privacy that may have been violated in the past is rendered obsolete. The same goes for learning a new language: it's not just words added to a vocabulary, it's different categories and ways of thinking about the world. And when a Wall Street banker checks out and heads to the Caribbean to teach surfing, that's not only a change in the weather but a switch in basic values. The question about what's worth having and what's worth doing with the only life we'll ever have is coming back with different answers.

Of course on privacy's most tangible level there's stubborn biological information which seems difficult to elude (genetic traits, future vulnerabilities related to past injuries). Physical conversions nevertheless come with exercise and diet changes, or with surgery and drugs. Even tattoos, piercings, and similar body modifications may

reformulate the delicate and intimate elements defining how we identify who we are in space.

So, whether personal information corresponds with faith, aspirations, or physical conditions, the privacy delineating us no longer needs to be *protected* from the data gatherers, or concealed like secrets kept in a hideaway. Instead, when we think about our own private realm, it is safeguarded by transience, which promises the information's obsolescence, and escape from all violation.

3.
The conventional primacy of nouns over verbs in the conception of identity can be reversed.

Starting with the convention, nouns as primary means there *is* someone who I am, and that determines what I do. So, since I am a person who once lived in Mexico, I may want to travel back and visit the country.

It makes sense, and the logic aligns well with the standard big data business model: users are resolved as *who* they are, which allows algorithmic predictions about consumption behaviors, and subsequently financial profit. This is precisely why algorithms constantly serve banner ads for Mexico City flights onto the webpages I browse.

But, identity can also go the other way. I *do*, and the person I am comes after, as an effect of what has been done. Following this logic, I'm the *kind* of person who lived in Mexico *because* I went there.

So, why did I go if I wasn't already predisposed, if Mexican traveler wasn't already *in* me as a substantive part of my being? It could be anything, perhaps the cause was only tangentially related to the destination. It may have been a bitterly cold day in a northern American city when a good deal on a one-way air ticket appeared in a travel agency window. Regardless, if that's the order – if it's the verb of what is done before the noun of who I am – then what it means to be me or you always comes after what we do. Maybe we embrace the trip as who we are, or maybe we drink until we forget about the whole thing.

Either way, identity is always just over the horizon: we're all interminably waiting to see who we're going to be. In a sense, we find out about ourselves just as others do: by watching and listening.

Examples of verb-privileging are common. No one drinks to excess because they're an alcoholic; they become an alcoholic because they've been drinking, excessively. Or, two people are not lovers in the noun sense, until after the verb sense.

There's also an overlap here with the theory of decadence in the history of philosophy, which reverses the conventional noun and verb privileging, in terms of the relation between truth and thought.

The orthodox reason we engage in philosophical thinking is to reach truth in some form. Thought *serves* truth. But verb privileging goes the other way, which means the reason we value philosophical truth is to incite more thought.

Consequently, the best truths are *not* those describing the world accurately, or enlighteningly, they're the ones most energetically fueling the next round of philosophizing. Certainly a debate could be had about *whether* enlightening understandings do more for thought than erroneous ones. That debate would only be worth having, however, if it was judged intellectually stimulating, that is, if it fueled more investigation. As for the conclusion, it's irrelevant. Conclusions always are since the only reason we even have them is to *serve* the drive toward others. Philosophy, in a sentence, is about *doing* thought, not *having* truth.

Polemically, we could say that professional philosophers already subscribe to this view; the best books and journal articles are identified as those stimulating the most *subsequent* writing, the most support and criticism. As for whether the original work is right or wrong, it's not that we remain undecided and therefore the pages keep coming, it's that *because* pages keep flowing from the indecision, it remains. Like everything about truth, it exists to serve more thought.

There's something of this in finding a book or article is *interesting*, which is a backhanded compliment, but also a realization that the work's primary value is the catalyzing of still more writing.

Finally, moving the logic of decadence onto the ethical level of integrity and authenticity, the analogous claim is that the best conception of the self today is *not* the one capturing all the data points, and then resolving who I am. It's the one most energetically sparking *new* data points, on the way to becoming someone else. Just as the reason philosophers have truths is to stimulate more thought, so too the reason we craft understandings of who we are is *so that* we may become another.

When personal ethics in the age of big data is underwritten by the privileging of verbs over nouns, then the best person to be is the one most primed for future disintegration, for coming inauthenticity.

Conclusion

No doubt it will be dreadful when children begin finding ways to access their parents' old Tinder pages. And, it's petrifying to imagine how stilted life will become as we learn that every one of our distinct selves may be revealed to the wrong person at the most inopportune moment. Still, all this would only be an observation if the pressure for identity integration were nothing more than a collateral result of advancing big data. What goes further, and makes it diabolical, is that integrity and authenticity is being enforced as an ethics.

Of course it may be that there's nothing diabolical about being one, unified person for everyone. More, we *shouldn't have* any part of ourselves to hide. Integrity is good.

Maybe.

At the same time, it's also true that it has never been easier to *get out* of who we are, to disrupt our existences from the bottom up by connecting with unfamiliar tastes, urges, and directions. Take LinkedIn: only a generation ago the job search was limited to the advertisements found in local newspapers, trade publications, and the doors that could be physically knocked-on. Now, accessible openings feed to our screens at blinding speeds and from the furthest geographical and cultural reaches. And for those who make a resonant appeal to the recruiter who's willing to take a chance, they can be gone the next day.

End

[1] Kirkpatrick, David. *The Facebook Effect*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2011.) p. 199. 978-1439102121) <https://venturebeat.com/2010/05/13/zuckerberg-privacy/>
[2] Schultermandl (Ed), Toplu (Ed). *A Fluid Sense of Self: The Politics of Transnational Identity*. (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2010). p. 120.
[3] Eberhardt, Isabelle. *Ecrits sur le sable*. (Paris: Grasset, 1989).