digital ego

What is this?
The case for continually questioning our online experience

Dan Nixon

PERSPECTIVA

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Part of the Digital Ego project.

What does it mean to grow and flourish, together, in a digital age?

The Digital Ego Project is a Perspectiva initiative which seeks to speak at a systematic level to technology's mediation of modern life, asking what narratives and frames can connect personal experience to the global picture; can find virtue in the virtual realm; and can place a properly understood sense of self and soul at the heart of our mediated lives.

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Dorothea Lange – 'Pledge of Allegiance at Raphael Weill Elementary School, San Francisco', 1942. *Photograph Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-USZ62-17124*

It is all too easy to take what we see for granted. Even the most basic act of perception can encompass so much more than at first seems to be the case. 'Seeing is more than a physiological phenomenon', the American photographer, Dorothea Lange, once remarked.[1] 'We see not only with our eyes but with all that we are and all that our culture is'. We might even say that our human being is to a large extent a matter of human perceiving; as the philosopher Pierre Teilhard de Chardin put it, the totality of life lies in the verb seeing.

This 'frame', life as seeing, is well suited for efforts to understand the various ways in which our digital technologies are shaping our lives at the deepest levels. Checking in with so many feeds and updates throughout the day, our everyday experience has become increasingly fragmented; in what can feel like a digital 'hall of mirrors', it is ever harder to see things in an integrated way. Meanwhile, our social fabric is increasingly tugged by divisive forces that split us apart and encourage us to see past each other entirely.

Underlying both sets of issues lies the particular logic of a digital media ecosystem through which everything comes to be viewed, at some level, in terms of data. As the philosopher Luciano Floridi notes, digital technologies 'make us think about the world informationally and make the world we experience informational'.

It is within this context that Perspectiva has launched the Digital Ego Project,[2] with the aim of exploring what it means to grow and flourish as humans against this digital background to our lives. As Tom Chatfield, my co-lead for the project, sets out, this inquiry includes starting a dialogue around the 'virtues for the virtual'[3] that we collectively need to cultivate. Capacities such as critical thinking, kindness and humility seem especially important here, as does our ability to see things from multiple perspectives, to adopt a more integrated worldview, to be okay with not knowing.

Yet underpinning all of the above, and amidst the swirl of urgent issues we find ourselves caught up in at the current time – the pandemic, taut political climates, our precarious environmental position, to name but a few – I argue here that what we need most of all is to cultivate a spirit of questioning towards our actual, lived experience in the digital sphere of our lives. Not so much cerebral efforts

to pin things down in order to get fixed answers, but an ongoing, open-ended questioning towards what's happening in our actual experience. *It's the practice of coming back to the simple question, 'what is this?', over and over again, in relation to all that we encounter with and through our digital technologies.*

Using this simple method, what follows is an invitation to question our actual experience at all levels: from our most mundane day-to-day experiences using our technologies, through to the less visible forces and contexts shaping those experiences. We will consider: what is the quality of the exchanges we are having online? How does a particular 'currency of ideas' shape how we see ourselves and others on social media platforms, and what might we experiment with here? How do our egos come to take centre-stage in our online spaces? What options do we have, amidst the algorithms and incentives underpinning our media ecosystem, for getting a more expansive view of what's really going on?

We will end with some of the deeper questions that emerge from this inquiry, reflecting on what is problematic about the tech mindset of 'solutionism' and why an open-ended spirit of questioning can serve as the ideal response. Why should we be vigilant about making room for the inherent mysteriousness of our everyday experience? Why, finally, is it crucial that we consider what silence and stillness and 'intermundane space' look like in a digitally-mediated world?

Before exploring these different levels of questioning, let me briefly outline the general approach a little further…

Questioning as a spiritual and philosophical practice for the digital age

For over twenty years, the Zen meditation teachers Martine and Stephen Batchelor have taught the practice of continually coming back to the simple question, 'what is this?', in relation to one's actual, lived experience. Through questioning, they suggest, we can learn to undercut our habitual tendency to fixate on things, to identify with some sense that 'I am like this', or 'This is like that'.

This chimes with the value placed on curiosity in the West, although the form of questioning undertaken in the Zen tradition is quite distinctive. Recounting his years spent living in a monastery in Korea, Stephen Batchelor describes how 'we would all sit in a darkened room and ask ourselves 'What is this?'. And rest with that question. Nothing else'. In *What is this? Ancient questions for modern minds*, written with Stephen, Martine elaborates:

> *The practice is about questioning; it's not a practice of answering… [it's about] trying to cultivate a sensation of questioning in the whole body and mind. The anchor is the question, and we come back to the question again and again.*

The practice that the Batchelors describe is a spiritual one, but a similar spirit of questioning runs through the philosophical tradition of phenomenology. Beginning with the work of Edmund Husserl around the turn of the 20th Century, phenomenologists emphasise the need to *describe* what our everyday 'lived' experience is actually like before jumping too quickly into theorisations and abstractions that seek to *explain* that experience. Thus to adopt a phenomenological stance, the French thinker Maurice Merleau-Ponty suggested in the middle of the 20th Century, is to accept being the 'perpetual beginner': always coming back to what is present in the here and now, with an interest in asking questions as much as with holding definitive answers. The practice of asking 'what is this?' thus dovetails naturally with this approach.

For the present inquiry into how our everyday experience plays out with and through our technologies, a phenomenological stance is especially apt since it balances a patient inquiry into the nature of our actual experience while taking care not to become too inward-looking. In Husserl's words, we must keep orientated towards 'the things themselves' – towards the world around us, the world we inhabit. In addition, several of the leading figures in the phenomenological tradition explicitly took up the *life as seeing* frame; Merleau-Ponty, for instance, wrote that philosophy is ultimately a matter of 'relearning to look at the world'.

We will explore, then, how a spirit of questioning might offer us a means to seeing more fully. This interplay between questioning and seeing was something that Lange was alive to during her photographical assignments across the United States during the Depression era and the decades that followed. She remarked that:

> *No one was ever given exact directions… You were turned loose in a region, and the assignment was, see what is really there. What does it look like, what does it feel like? What actually is the human condition?*

And yet, to properly ask these questions, we have to be able to slow down, something I've come to appreciate as an art in itself since beginning my journey with meditation around a decade or so ago. Lange once again said it very well:

> *This benefit of seeing... can come only if you pause a while, extricate yourself from the maddening mob of quick impressions ceaselessly battering our lives, and look thoughtfully at a quiet image... the viewer must be willing to pause, to look again, to meditate.*

What follows is therefore not so much an intellectual exercise as a meditation on what an ongoing, open-ended spirit of questioning – what is this? – can yield as we contend with the various challenges of our digitally-mediated lives. How might coming back, again and again, to this simple question direct us towards the most urgent issues that we face – individually and collectively – and fruitful means of resolving them?

Questioning our basic experience in online spaces: what is this?

We begin at the level of our most everyday experiences with and through digital technologies. Often enough, we don't need to actively ask the question 'what is this?' at all. When I find myself following links to other people's reactions to 'unsatisfying' videos[4] or ASMR 'head orgasms'[5], say, or checking emails on my phone moments after refreshing my inbox on my computer, the question arises of its own accord. The same is true when it comes to the many surprises and perversions of social media, such as when we encounter perfectly toned, glamorous-looking Instagrammers who pose – who need to pose – with giant ice-creams or greasy pizza slices that they obviously did not eat (see the account @youdidnoteatthat). As the writer Sophie McBain commented[6]: 'how mind-bending it is that one tried-and-tested way to look good online is to buy good-looking food that you cannot eat, for fear of looking less good online'.

A hallmark of both Zen and phenomenology, however, is to extend this curiosity towards even the most seemingly mundane experiences of our 'lifeworld', to use Husserl's term to denote the largely unreflected-upon background of our lives against which all of our experiences and deliberations take place. Our lifeworld today is one that is very much mediated[7] by our technologies, so entwined are our everyday lives with them.

The exercise, then, is to bring a curious attention – what is this? – again and again to the routine acts of checking our social media feeds, to scrolling through news updates, to reaching out to Google a random historical event that just popped into our minds. In each case, we simply practice asking ourselves: what's going on here? What is the atmosphere of a given online space like? What background feelings am I aware of during this digitally-mediated experience? *What is this?*

In my own experience of doing this, one thing I've become aware of is just how easily a sense of aimlessness sweeps over me when I spend time on my phone. It's as though I enter into a hall or mirrors, caught up in the streams of 'hyper-palatable'[8] images and opinions vying for my attention. Returning to a question like 'what is this?' or 'what am I doing here?' is a simple but powerful way to pull myself

out from that familiar cycle. Martine Batchelor writes that through such questioning, we develop our ability to notice when we get lost in thought, when we are 'not totally here with this multi-perspectival experience' but rather 'caught in just one aspect of it'.

It goes without saying that our technologies enable an amazing array of ways to connect and collaborate with each other. Even so, how polarised we've become is clearly one of the most pressing problems facing communities and societies today.

But I'd like to focus most of all on questioning the social dimensions of our day-to-day digitally-mediated experience. Some questions we can regularly ask ourselves here include: what is the quality of the exchanges we're having in our online spaces? In what ways are we perceiving ourselves and others with and through our digital technologies? How, overall, is the social fabric being rendered digital?

Here, I have to remind myself that Twitter and Facebook, YouTube and the iPhone all only came into existence around 15 years or so ago. So while some of us may be digital natives, we're all, at best, digital adolescents. There is a need to take a step back and consider where the still very new world of smartphones and social platforms have taken us societally.

It goes without saying that our technologies enable an amazing array of ways to connect and collaborate with each other. Even so, how polarised we've become is clearly one of the most pressing problems facing communities and societies today, and one which demands close attention to the way in which our online spaces serve our relationships with one another. The background energy of antagonism that percolates so many online spaces is exhausting, I find, even as a passive observer. In *How To Do Nothing*, the artist and writer Jenny Odell paints an evocative image of this type of online experience, writing that it feels like 'firecrackers setting off other firecrackers in a very small room that soon gets filled with smoke'.

Faced with the levels of polarisation and tribalism that we encounter day-to-day, it's natural to reach for explanations and solutions. But, as important as these are, we also need to pause and rest with the question: what's actually going on here? What is this phenomenon that's taken place in such a short space of time?

To help us practically, here, we can reflect on two further sets of questions relating to our everyday experience…

What kind of a person am I becoming? Where am I kindest?

We can, to begin with, consider again and again what kind of a person the use of a particular technology is leading us to become. What habits of thought and attention (underpinned by neurological changes)[9] am I cultivating through my use of this or that technology? How often do I find I'm feeling angry or dismissive using a particular platform of device? Where, by contrast, do I find myself most patient and sensitive towards others' feelings? Overall, which platforms bring out the best and the worst in me?

Because the technologies we use remain relatively new, we benefit from asking these questions on a continual basis. I find it helpful to focus in on one question that particularly resonates at a given time. For example, I've recently been coming back to the simple question: Am I being as kind as I want to be? By resting with a question such as this, we cultivate a greater awareness of our existing patterns of feeling and behaviour, while paving the way for experimenting with new habits that can free us from getting stuck in a rut.

Which platform designs support healthier social interactions?

We can also constantly experiment with new technologies entirely. There are many examples to choose from, but a brief look at the reforms adopted by Audrey Tang, Taiwan's digital minister, is illustrative here.

In 2015, for example, disruptions to Taiwan's taxi industry forced the authorities to ensure that regulatory and competition policies kept pace with how the industry was changing. Views on what to do varied greatly across stakeholders (citizens, taxi drivers, Uber representatives, government officials and so on). In response, Tang used a decentralised platform, pol.is, that allowed various stakeholders to draft statements on how to proceed, each one beginning with 'My feeling is…'. Participants were subsequently asked to abstain, agree, or disagree with each statement. The design of the platform was thus focussed on generating consensus: through an iterative process, stakeholders continued to draft statements, but the ones that were given most visibility were those that garnered support from both sides of the debate, leading[10] to a resolution which the government

subsequently adopted (with several sides making important concessions).

At the heart of such platform designs is a move away from the false sense of 'us versus them' that often emerges through standard social media platforms. Such moves require us to question which features genuinely support healthier social exchanges, suspending our assumptions as to which we deem to be positive in an abstract sense. Rather, we should ask: in which contexts does anonymity, say, work best? Or transparency? Or a full suite of 'engagement' tools? The answers, Tang suggests, depend on the usage. She considers the case of 'Reply' buttons as an example. In theory, these promote debate; but in practice, Tang argues[11], in many settings they serve as an invitation to trolls to wreak havoc by spreading disinformation, engaging in invective, or creating distraction. If, instead, the interface restricts engagement to merely expressing approval or disapproval, Tang suggests, the trolls lose interest.

Questioning the contexts shaping our digital experience: what is this?

To fully explore what is going on in the digital sphere of our lives, we also need to continually question the various structural factors, many of which are hidden from view, that are shaping our experience.

'What you're taking for granted is always more important than whatever you have your mind fixed on', the literary critic Hugh Kenner wrote in homage to the work of his onetime teacher, the media theorist Marshall McLuhan. The latter's approach to understanding new forms of media remains as relevant today as it did when he was writing in the 1960s. Drawing on the concept of figure and ground from Gestalt psychology, McLuhan argued that while we naturally fixate on the value of content (the 'figure') – a particular TV show, for instance – it is the medium itself (the 'ground') – TV shows at large, to stick with the example – that deserves our attention. This led to his famous suggestion that *the medium is the message*.

Reflecting on today's problems of polarisation and tribalism, of outrage and reactivity, of the marginalisation of nuance, context and critical thinking, we should continually ask: to what extent is the medium the message when it comes to how things play out via smartphones, social media platforms, search engines and so on?

To what extent is the medium the message when it comes to how things play out via smartphones, social media platforms, search engines?

There have been many insightful analyses around precisely this point: how our experiences of what others are saying and doing online, and how we are invited to respond, are greatly shaped by the design of the platform in question. The sociologist Zeynep Tufekci, to give one well-known example, wrote in 2018 about how YouTube's algorithms push[12] users towards more and more 'extreme' content. If you watch a video to get tips on jogging, you'll be invited to watch videos about ultra-marathons; if you watch someone advocating a moderate left-wing / right-wing political viewpoint, you'll quickly be served up far more radical views of whichever camp.

Zooming out further, we can inquire into the political and economic structures which give rise to algorithmic design choices. Instead of trying to summarise the various critiques of this kind here, I'll instead offer just a few questions we can regularly come back to. The first, and most obvious, question is: what is the business model of a given platform, and how does that shape the content I see and how it's presented to me? What does it mean for the world's largest corporations to be not only concentrated in the tech sector (six out of the top seven multinationals)[13] but also to be far more intimately entwined in our everyday lives – what we believe, how we feel, what we do – than is true for a typical multinational in other sectors (like energy, manufacturing and so on)? What is this?

Raising awareness of such analyses is crucial, because when millions of people encounter 'triggering' content that fuels feelings of hostility, all at once, all of the time, we have to ask: what's going on here? Do we locate the cause of this emotion at the door of the person espousing the egregious view or with the platforms serving our media diets?

Here, I'll expand on three 'background' qualities of our digitally-mediated lifeworld which are easily taken for granted, but which warrant our attention if we are to properly understand problems like polarisation properly. In each case, resting with the question 'what is this?' in relation to our actual experience can help both in shedding light on the nature of the phenomena in question and in pointing us in useful directions when it comes to doing things differently.

From particular 'content' to the overall framing of debates: what is this?

Perhaps we're familiar with the 'medium is the message' critique at the level of the particular views and images we're presented with. But to what extent is the medium the message when it comes to the overall framings and metaphors that serve as a kind of 'container' for how those views are presented to us?

Take the culture wars, for example. We are naturally drawn into particular arguments about a whole range of issues. But we can pause to ask: what, exactly, is cultural about the 'culture wars'? Why is this expression used to describe what's going on?

Writing on Ribbon Farm[14], Venkatesh Rao points out that it's hardly as though the nominal bones of contention ('the status of the Western canon in higher education', and so on) typically receive much in the way of discerning, high-quality discussion on platforms like Facebook or Twitter. Rao is sceptical, too, of the suggestion that the spectacle per se is meant to serve as a form of artistic cultural production. 'Maybe you enjoy the show', he writes, 'but I suspect most observers are with me in concluding that [the spectacle] is largely bereft of aesthetic merit, and infinitely more capable of producing cortisol than art'.

Instead he suggests what we encounter in our online spaces is the natural consequence of media platforms designed around profit incentives in combination with basic human impulses to react to provocation (as Tristan Harris puts it: 'the race to the bottom of the brain-stem'). Rao concludes that the 'pointless and endless' conflict unfolding on our public spaces is one which, by its very nature, will always resist meaningful resolution under the design of the digital media ecosystem as it currently stands. Our online public spaces, he says, have slowly been taken over by 'a stable, endemic, background

societal condition of continuous conflict'. This is just one interpretation of what's going on, but to the extent that Rao's thesis is correct, we can consider how we might act differently as a result of these insights.

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In the case of the culture wars, we can more accurately view the whole phenomenon playing out before us not as a *culture war* but as never-ending micro-expressions of a *culture of conflict* arising from how our digital media ecosystem is designed, Rao concludes. This is a helpful distinction. For so many highly-charged debates seem important, and if I sub-consciously accept the framings at face value (a culture war, a clash of values), then this only adds to the sense that I should engage. But where, upon reflection, I see an exchange primarily as a manifestation of a culture of conflict – and it requires discernment as to when to make that call – the urge to get sucked in often fades away as quickly as it arises.

Hanging out in a 'world of opinions': what is this?

This leads us to a more general observation: that when we go on Twitter or Reddit or most news sites, we enter a domain governed almost entirely by the currency of ideas. This commentator is saying this, sparking a whole set of reactions about *that* bone of contention. While obvious, this nonetheless deserves a moment of reflection. The bottomless feed of opinions hovers in a virtual world: you don't, from the perspective of your online activity, engage with people in the flesh, you don't engage with ambient sounds, with light breezes, with subtle smells. You engage just with what's posted.

So while it's true that on Twitter you find humour and revealing images and poignant observations, for the most part the platform does seem to revolve around this currency of ideas: you enter into a *world of opinions* where an 'us versus them' mindset is the norm, not the exception. To go one step further, it can feel like entering a *world of egos*, if we take 'ego' to refer to the various beliefs and values that we each identify with, such that the more tightly one holds to a particular opinion, the stronger the egoic charge. And in a world of egos, who is right and who is wrong, per se, readily takes centre-stage over genuine interest in the issues themselves. Again: what is this?
To understand why this is how things are, the point we are all fa-

miliar with is that social media and news apps serve us 'triggering' content since this is the easiest way to capture our attention. But there's also a subtler dynamic in play. Online spaces at the extreme end of the generality spectrum, I assert, bring out the 'egoic' in us most strongly. Compared to online spaces that are dedicated towards a (genuine) community sharing a niche interest, in the case of platforms like Twitter, we find ourselves drawn to engage with a stream of opinions almost for its own sake.

That qualification is crucial. We need to read. We need to listen, to debate, to discuss, to mull things over; we need to form opinions on a whole range of issues to function and participate in society. But spaces which revolve around a stream of opinions that solicit us to habitually 'check in' with that stream for the sake of it don't bring out the best in us. I have always liked the succinct way that the Buddha is said to have put it in the *Sutta Nipata*, that 'people with opinions just go around bothering one another'.

Again, this is not to say we shouldn't form opinions. Rather, it's that when platforms like Twitter present themselves as 'what's happening right now', we should question whether 'what opinions are going around right now' isn't a better framing (and the opinions of a very small[15] group of people, at that). With this questioning – with this reframing – we might opt to continue as before, albeit bringing an awareness to the 'egoic charge' of what we're engaging with and becoming more conscious as to how and when we express our own opinions. In other cases, where the perceived egoic charge of a particular platform, debate or influencer is particularly high – gauged by how much 'being right', 'us versus them' mindsets and hostility dominate the overall atmosphere – we may choose to redirect our time and energies towards other forms of exchange[16] entirely.

The disappearance of the 'lived body' online: what is this?

A space which is governed by a currency of ideas is also one in which the domain of the body – the body as you actually feel it – gets pushed to the margins. Anecdotally, from everyone I've spoken to about this, this seems to be true: we tend not[17] to be aware of our 'lived' experience of the body while using smartphones and social apps. Generally speaking, when I enter an online space, my body as good as disappears.

Why is this worth paying attention to? Western philosophers have, after all, tended to treat the body as an object, with questions around the essential nature of our humanity or the source of meaning framed in distinctly intellectual/cerebral terms.[18] As I've argued[19] elsewhere, this basic stance infuses our culture and discourse in various ways.

What is it like to view ourselves and other people online, first and foremost, as living, breathing, pulsing beings?

Merleau-Ponty, however, posited quite a different worldview. When we pay attention to our simplest experiences of being alive, he wrote in 1945, what we encounter is the 'lived body' as the centre of our entire experience. Our 'higher' faculties for abstract thinking and suchlike still feature; but as living beings in human form, he suggested, we are, before all else, breathing, pulsing, embodied beings that touch and feel and move. Before thinking comes into play, we are always body-subjects.

On this account, the disappearance of the 'lived body' in our digital environments becomes a cause for concern. In fact, I wonder whether our state of disembodiment online isn't a significant factor giving rise to the entrenched levels of polarisation and tribalism that we are witnessing currently; the 'outer' divisions between people reflecting our 'inner' severing of the mind from the body. (It should be noted, here, that of course there's no shortage of body images on social media platforms. But what we encounter in these cases is what Merleau-Ponty called the 'objective body': the body as an object, the body as presented for scrutiny and judgment, rather than the pulsing body we inhabit).

We can, at any rate, try out a couple of things in relation to our embodiment online. The first is to practise questioning our experience from the body's standpoint. 'Far more important than the words of the question is the psychosomatic resonance that the question evokes', Stephen Batchelor writes. Rather than asking 'what is this?' with the head, he suggests, we can 'draw [it] down and ask it from the belly… Try to pose it with the whole body and mind'. Next time you find yourself checking something on your phone, take a moment to notice what's going on from a bodily perspective. Are you breathing naturally or holding your breath? Are you holding tension, or are you relaxed? What's your awareness of your body as a whole?

If you make this kind of check-in a habit, you may start to recognise patterns to your (dis)embodied experience across different kinds of devices, platforms and activities. I've begun accessing social apps almost exclusively using my laptop, rather than my phone, because it feels less passive (and more intentional) this way – and I suspect that this, in turn, has a lot to do with the way in which my body posture affects the overall experience.

Second, we can experiment socially with this. What is it like to view ourselves and other people online, first and foremost, as living, breathing, pulsing beings? Against the views and opinions that normally come to define the identities we attach to all of these people, what is it like to come back, again and again, to seeing Twitter, say, as a global constellation of millions of breathing, beating bodies (plus, granted, a few bots)? And for every 'body' we encounter on Instagram, what is it like to imagine, for a moment, what the basic experiences of stretching and turning and breathing are like for the person behind the image? Such exercises may seem silly, and to some extent they are. But this lightness helps to loosen our association between the person whose opinion or image we are presented with and the categorisations and judgments that we tend to layer on top. Imagining the basic embodiment of another person also opens up our shared vulnerability; and as the artist David 'Mr StarCity' White aptly put it in a recent interview,[20] *we deserve to be vulnerable with one another.*

Resting in the spaces in between: making room for the mystery of experience and a shared 'intermundane' space

Having looked at what our immediate experience in the digitally-mediated lifeworld is like, and some of the hidden forces shaping that experience, what remains is to reflect on what our experience of various forms of *betweenness* and *inaction* are like as our lives become increasingly entwined with our technologies.

Take silence, for example, taken as not simply the binary opposite to sound, but the deeper silence that pervades all sound, all music, all discourse. In his later work, Merleau-Ponty wrote of the need to rediscover 'the world of silence', to 'uncover the threads of silence that speech is mixed together with'. How, we might ask, does this deeper and more poetic silence feature in our digitally-mediated worlds? Likewise, when it comes to slowing down, or spaciousness, or dreaming, or doing nothing, or the inherent mystery of experiencing anything at all: what do each of these mean in our digitally-mediated contexts? Can they even be rendered digital? And why is it important to consider these angles if we are to 'relearn to look at the world'?

The tech mindset of 'solutionism': what is this?

Before discussing these themes, let me try to pin-point the essence of how our technologies shape our experience, based on the discussion so far. As noted at the outset, digital technologies tend to make us think about the world informationally while making the world we experience informational. We might say that the apotheosis of the Silicon Valley mindset, then, is to view everything, including all aspects of human experience and relationships, in terms of data (what Yuval Noah Harari terms 'dataism').

When you see the world this way – as a tech developer, as a tech user – you almost inevitably start to take on a mindset of optimisation: life comprises a set of problems to be solved through technological means. Or at least, that is overwhelmingly the message that Big Tech gives us. Whatever it is you need to do, you're invited to 'Make Google do it'.[21]

To stay informed, you're told that 'when it happens, it happens on Twitter'[22]. To find everyone around you active on Facebook is a sign the world is coming 'closer together'.[23]

Tech companies tend to presume, rather than openly investigate, the problems they set out to tackle; they reach for solutions before the questions have been fully asked.

In reality, of course, this 'solutionist' mindset is a very particular way of approaching life. I'm reminded of a conference on Digital Wellbeing that I attended in London in the fall of 2019, where a product manager from Google's Android operating system described various innovations designed to boost wellbeing. Most of the features themselves, like new kinds of notification for screen-time, seemed sensible enough. But everything was framed in a particular way. We were told, for instance, that when we find ourselves standing at the bus-stop, we can benefit from having fewer notifications 'because our most creative ideas come out of these moments of boredom'.

Yet the absence of stimulation is not the same as boredom. Likewise, the idea that doing nothing in particular makes sense only if I 'get' something in return is one way to view life, but it's a very reductionist one. As Evgeny Morozov noted in 2013 when he coined the term 'tech solutionism'[24], tech companies tend to presume, rather than openly investigate, the problems they set out to tackle; they reach for solutions before the questions have been fully asked.

The most fundamental application of an ongoing spirit of questioning in relation to our digitally-mediated lives, in my view, is precisely to demand that our technologies give us *more* than solutions: that, as well as helping us perform various tasks, they're designed to support our ability to openly question things.

There is more than a little irony in this since, in several instances, the founders of Big Tech companies owe their success precisely to the 'open questioning' attitude that their creations seem to limit on the part of tech users. For instance, Google's co-founder, Larry Page, has credited[25] his and Sergey Brin's success to their education in Montessori schools, where they learned about 'not following rules and orders… questioning what's going on in the world, doing things a little bit differently'. Jeff Bezos had a similar schooling and the writer Peter Sims links[26] this spirit of questioning to Bezos's subsequent success.

'Those who work with Mr. Bezos, for example, find his ability to ask 'why not?' or 'what if?' as much as 'why?' to be one of his most advantageous qualities. Questions are the new answers'.

Can our digital technologies serve as instruments that teach us how to see the world more fully not only with, but also without these technologies?

To usher in a 'post-solutionist' tech paradigm, then, it is incumbent upon us all – tech users, critics and developers – to ask 'what if' and 'why not' about the possibility of technologies that are designed to support a continual spirit of questioning.

Or, returning to the frame of life as seeing, we can draw inspiration from Dorothea Lange's famous remark that 'the camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera'. Taking this forward to our present situation, we can continually hold the various players in our digital media ecosystem to account (including ourselves, as tech users) with this question: *can our digital technologies serve as instruments that teach us how to see the world more fully not only with, but also without these technologies?*

Closing in on the mysteriousness of the world: what is this?

Writing half a century before the smartphone era, Gabriel Marcel expressed[27] concerns about what he saw as the solutionism of his time. A 'broken world', he wrote, is one that is 'on the one hand, riddled with problems and, on the other, determined to allow no room for mystery' by virtue of becoming caught up in technical problem-solving as an exhaustive worldview. Seeing things such as birth, love and death as devoid of any mysterious nature, he went on to say, destroys our personality and inevitably gives way to despair.

Similarly, Heidegger's seminal critique of technology, published in 1954, took the fulcrum of the issue to be not the particulars of new technologies themselves but the overly narrow technological mindset that we can so easily sleepwalk into if we are not vigilant. (The title of the essay, 'A Question Concerning Technology', was significant; in order to prepare a free relationship to technology, he suggested, 'questioning builds a way').

The 'broken world' that Marcel and Heidegger warned of echoes strongly into today's digitally-mediated lifeworld. Towards the end of *Ten Arguments For Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, Jaron Lanier notes that 'experience is a mystery, deeper than other

mysteries, because we know of no way to break it into parts to study it'. But a mindset of optimisation closes in on this mysteriousness of experience; it does not compute. Lanier concludes that if we design a society to suppress any beliefs in our conscious experience pertaining to anything deeper than what we get via an informational worldview, 'then maybe people can become like machines'. It's a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: 'when you live as if there's nothing special, no mystical spark inside you, you gradually start to believe it'.

How can we allow space for the mysteriousness of experience to emerge? Challenging the mindset of tech solutionism is crucial, and I believe that cultivating a habit of open-ended questioning – 'what is this?' – is especially freeing and generative. Again, this kind of questioning is not in the service of getting something, but simply a means to reconnecting with the totality of our actual, embodied experience in any given moment. This, in itself, can serve as a gateway to the realisation that our experience is always profoundly mysterious, at some level, if we are prepared to slow down enough to see it. Stephen Batchelor offers the following example from his time in Northern India:

> *I was walking through the woods above McLeod Ganj, lugging a bucket of water, and all of a sudden I found myself stopped in my tracks, simply overwhelmed by the utter strangeness of what was happening—the incredible weirdness of just being there, of standing in that forest with a bucket of water hanging from my right arm… If we are open to it, we realize that life itself in its gritty simplicity is profoundly and overwhelmingly mysterious.*

Reading this, I instantly felt a resonance with what Batchelor is describing. The passage transports me, for a moment, to the depicted scene; not from a shared history of lugging water through the forest, but because the 'incredible weirdness' of what otherwise appears as an unremarkable event is something I've experienced on several occasions. My own 'buckets of water' moments have often been solitary ones, but I'm also reminded of a time a few years back when I visited a friend from the UK who had moved to Frankfurt. It was a warm evening, and we were heading out to some bars in the city but spontaneously found ourselves sitting by the river, instead, with a sense of not needing to be anywhere or do anything. Time seemed to stand

still for a while; we were awed by the mysteriousness of our simply *being there*, fully present – without intoxicants – to what was slowly unfolding around us, witnesses to the play of pinks and ambers that reflected off the water as the sun went down. Perhaps you can relate to some experience like this, too, and the pause, or the stillness, that is needed for such a moment to present itself.

These examples make me wonder about 'enhancing' my reality with a pair of Google glasses, say. I'm not saying that I definitely won't be wearing a pair in years to come. But the crucial point is that whereas from an informational perspective, a pair of Google glasses may 'add' to what we see before us, from an embodied, experiential perspective, we will always need discernment to judge what is 'added' and what is 'lost'. I suspect that Batchelor would not have experienced the profound mystery of just being there had he been viewing that forest and those buckets through the Google glasses lens, and likewise for my experience in Frankfurt. As the poet Theodore Roethke wrote:

A mind too active is no mind at all
The deep eye sees the shimmer on the stone.

Photograph © Nobuyuki Kobayashi

The erosion of our shared 'intermundane' space: what is this?

Inquiring into slowing down and the spaces in-between also matters fundamentally to the social dimension of our digitally-mediated lives. Beneath the acute polarisation of our times lies a deeper problem: the erosion of a sense of shared space – of shared experience – in our online exchanges with one another. Writing in 2018, Lanier correctly stressed this as being the critical issue to engage with:

> *Trump supporters seem nuts to me, and they say liberals seem nuts to them… But it's wrong to say we've grown apart and can't understand each other. What's really going on is that we see less than ever before of what others are seeing, so we have less opportunity to understand each other.*

Again, we can place seeing at the heart of efforts to understand what is going on. In general, if everyone around you looks one way, you will likely do the same; if they look nervous – or relaxed – then, typically, you will, too. That is, perception is social.

Of course, our digital technologies can and do help us to share what we see in all kinds of ways. But we also know that our smartphone culture can shatter this process of social perception - for two main reasons.

First, since we receive personalised media feeds based on algorithms that are optimised to serve us content that keeps us hooked, *we're all seeing different worlds*. Because of this, our cues to one another have become distorted, at best, if not completely meaningless. Our perception of reality beyond the social media platform has suffered to the point where 'people often don't seem to be living in the same world, the real world, any more', Lanier writes.

The second reason social perception becomes more difficult is that when everyone around you is on their phone, you have less of a feeling for what's going on with them. As Lanier put it, 'their experiences are curated by faraway algorithms'. Similarly, Sherry Turkle points[28] to extensive research into how the quality of our offline interactions – dinner with family, coffee with a friend – takes a hit when our phones are out and visible, even if they're on silent.

To be clear, the locus of the problem centres not around the basic affordances of our technologies, such as the ability to connect (to each other, to sources of information) via the Internet in all kinds of ways. Instead, the problem is about how the design, structural forces and consequent usage of our technologies is currently playing out. More and more, we engage with each other 'in bits and pieces' (in Turkle's words) while the individualisation of our media feeds, and the associated echo chamber effects, are leading to the loss of dimensions to our shared experience. Lanier correctly labels this an 'epochal development'.

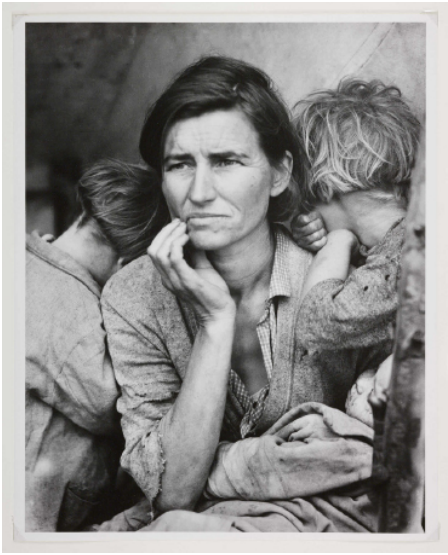
From a phenomenological perspective, Merleau-Ponty wrote about the intermundane space that exists between perceiving individuals as the basic background to the 'interworld' – *the world of and between living, perceiving, embodied beings* – that we inhabit in our everyday lives. The other person is 'caught up in a circuit that connects him to the world, as we ourselves are, and consequently also in a circuit that connects him to us – and this world is common to us… [it] is intermundane space'. It's a notion that helps us make sense of what's

going on: the epochal development unfolding is surely a desiccation of this intermundane space, this common ground.[29]

In her efforts to capture something of the ineffable characteristics of the human condition, Dorothea Lange, as with so many artists, had a respect for that kind of space – and the patience, and stillness, required to open onto it:

> *The people who are garrulous and wear their heart on their sleeve and tell you everything, that's one kind of person, but the fellow who's hiding behind a tree, and hoping you don't see him, is the fellow that you'd better find out why…. So often it's just sticking around and being there, remaining there, not swooping in and swooping out in a cloud of dust.*

How, then, in the digital age, can we 'stick around and be there'? Not passively, but not 'swooping in and swooping out in a cloud of dust' either? How can we re-inhabit that intermundane space that connects us to an embodied, persistently ambiguous, but distinctly living 'interworld'? Amidst the forces pulling us apart in our online spaces, exacerbated by the desiccation of shared space since the onset of the pandemic, how can we *be present* with and towards one another?



Dorothea Lange - Migrant Mother, Nipomo, CA, 1936.
Photograph Courtesy of the Library of Congress, LC-DIG-fsa-8b29516

While fixed answers to these questions may elude us, there are several avenues we can explore. We can, to begin with, consider which existing platforms best allow for the 'spaces in-between' (video meetings, for all their flaws, can be quite generative in this respect, compared to text exchanges). Shifting the balance of our media diet away from the 'world of opinions' and towards artistic expression is another way to open up space in our digital lifeworld. Artists such as Jenny Odell[30] and Shaun Leonardo[31] have spoken specifically about what it means to look in a participatory way – to bear witness – against the backdrop of a digital media ecosystem that can perpetuate a range of distortions if we don't make any effort in the basic act of looking.

We might consider, too, what a 'slow thought manifesto'[32] could look like in the digital context. Prefiguring the speed with which takedowns circulate online today, I'm reminded of a vignette that Sarah Bakewell relays[33] about the strain that needing to be 'engaged on every event, as if it were a test of morality' put on Merleau-Ponty's professional relationship with Sartre during their time together at the helm of the political journal, *Les Temps modernes*. Today, many

people I speak to find social media platforms exhausting for this reason; there seems to be a real desire for social platforms to evolve in ways that honour the deep value in embracing a slower pace, greater nuance, and – hardest of all to encode – the possibilities we're afforded by regularly pausing to rest, for a moment, in the 'intermundane space' between our fragile, pulsing bodies. I would love to see Jack Dorsey, Mark Zuckerberg and co. take the discussion about 'connection' to this deeper level.

My own experiences with yoga and meditation since the onset of the pandemic have hinted at the possibilities for resting in an 'intermundane space' between breathing bodies in an online setting.

Finally, we can look to awareness-based practices as a way to slow down and inhabit more space, online and offline. Rather than getting stuck in a reactive 'autopilot' mode, we can train[34] our capacity to hold all of our thoughts and emotions, all of our views and opinions, all of our clicks and shares in a field of embodied awareness: a kind of real-time 'witnessing' consciousness. Indeed, if you accept the attention economy[35] as the central locus of our lifeworld at this point in time, then it makes sense to place the cultivation of basic capacities for attention and open, non-judgmental awareness at the heart of an education strategy for the 2020s and beyond.

My own experiences with yoga and meditation since the onset of the pandemic have hinted at the possibilities for resting in an 'intermundane space' between breathing bodies in an online setting. Since the beginning of April 2020, for example, I've been joining short, 15-minute mindfulness sessions several times a week via Zoom and noticing how this serves as a way to intentionally, attentively, 'do nothing' for a while, with other people. And to do so against a backdrop of silence, occasionally interrupted by the sound of birdsong or traffic outside. *Breathing in the digital world*: as trivial as this sounds intellectually, I believe this simple notion does point to our most primordial means of reconnecting[36] with a sense of depth and mystery amidst it all.

‘Love the questions themselves’

‘It is at the same time true that the world is what we see and that, nonetheless, we must learn to see it’, Merleau-Ponty wrote. We must continually learn to see the world more fully – more clearly, but also more generously – as our lives become ever further entwined with our digital technologies. Amidst forces that are pulling the social fabric apart and making us increasingly divided and distrusting of one another, we can begin the path towards creating something better by cultivating an ongoing, open-ended spirit of questioning towards all we encounter in our digitally-mediated experience: asking, again and again, *what is this?*

The practice is simple. It is also equally valuable at all levels: in relation to notions like space and stillness, in relation to the structural factors shaping our digitally-mediated lives but also, equally, with regards to our most mundane, everyday experiences with and through technology.

Questions that we can regularly come back to include: what is my experience using various technologies actually like? How does this or that space feel? How does the ‘currency of ideas’ shape how I see myself and others? As a society, what is the quality of the exchanges we are having online? How we do make space for the mystery of experience in the context of our digitally-mediated lives? How can we better see things from multiple perspectives and rebuild a sense of common ground?

And then: how do these issues relate to the business models of tech companies, to the political economy of the digital age and, in turn, to live debates around the problems of fake news, online extremism and so on? On which issues can tech effectively self-regulate? Who should be tasked with enacting changes at the level of the system as a whole?

‘What is this?’ opens onto all of these avenues, but it is this simplest of formulations that we can keep coming back to over and over again. For me, personally, this *is* a spiritual practice to the extent I’m able to bring a sense of humility and care into this spirit of questioning: not seeking definite answers and not asking from the head as much as

from the heart. Perhaps we can take inspiration, spiritually, from this excerpt from Carlos Castaneda's *The Teachings of Don Juan*:

> *Look at every path closely and deliberately. Try it as many times as you think necessary. Then ask yourself and yourself alone one question… Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't, it is of no use.*

Or the poet Rilke put it like this:

> *Be patient toward all that is unsolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books that are now written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the answers, which cannot be given you because you would not be able to live them. And the point is, to live everything. Live the questions now.*

In such divided times, amidst the frantic pace and emotional charge of the 'culture of conflict' unfolding through our digitally-mediated world, pausing to question our experience again and again – *to love the questions themselves, to live the questions now* – can perhaps be the pivot-point we need in order to move towards seeing things more expansively, with greater nuance and from more perspectives, while always admitting the limitations of our own particular standpoint.

Our technologies are, in themselves, neither *the* problem nor *the* solution. Yet they significantly shape the context within which our lives are playing out and within which the challenges of our time are to be met. With this in mind, and with an ongoing spirit of questioning, we must insist on a genuinely 'post-solutionist' paradigm for our relationship with technology; coming back, again and again, to the demand that our digital technologies help us to see the world more fully both with and without them.

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