Being-online-in-the-world: A response to the special issue, 'Being Online'

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Hats off to the editors and contributors of the special issue of *Phenomenology & Practice*, *Being Online* (vol. 8, no. 4). As a whole and in parts, this is a highly stimulating collection of articles on one of the single most important and challenging subjects of our times. It is also one about which the phenomenology of practice has much to say. Guest editors Norm Friesen and Stacey Irwin begin the issue with a reflection on questioning, the essence of which, as Gadamer (2000, p. 299) says, lies in opening up possibilities and keeping them open. Invoking Heidegger's notion that "questioning builds a way" (1952, 1977, p. 3), the issue aims (and in my view succeeds), in opening different *ways of thinking* about the multiple ways of *Being Online*. This open invitation encompasses nothing less than the Internet, digitally mediated sociality and subjectivities with all the potentialities, actualities and ambiguities these phenomena imply. Proceeding from Heidegger's wayfinding metaphor, the issue invites us to explore what *Being Online* means for *being-in-the-world*.

With their attention to lived experience gained through the reflexive practice of *epoché*, phenomenologists are particularly well positioned for the kind of inquiry that moves beyond a functional, disembodied understanding of technology in order to situate it firmly in the lifeworld. This living world is one in which human beings cannot be taken as separate from the environments they inhabit and in which they are enveloped. Following the kind of relational ontology laid out Merleau-Ponty (2013), with its emphasis on the reversibility of energies between bodies and worlds (and by extension, tools and technologies), phenomenologists understand that existence is always already a dynamic co-existence. Bernhard Waldenfels is one such phenomenologist who proceeds from and radicalizes this position with the help of his former teacher Merleau-Ponty, as well as with Lévinas and Husserl. It was wonderful to see his work, which is sadly limited in English, being highlighted by Friesen in his article, "Telepresence and Teleabsence: Phenomenology of the (In)visible Alien Online*"*, as well as his short yet comprehensive introduction, "Waldenfels' Responsive Phenomenology of the Alien."

From Intentionality to Responsivity: The Importance of Waldenfels

As Friesen observes in both pieces, Waldenfels' unique contribution to phenomenology is his focus on responsivity, which he argues takes place *before* intentionality (Waldenfels, 1999/2003, 2011). Reading Waldenfels, who has built upon this notion in no less than thirty books (of which only three have been translated into English), we soon learn that this seemingly small conceptual substitution has major implications. Taking responsivity as a primary feature of human existence requires turning from intentional subjects to the demands, claims, and affects that come from elsewhere. For Waldenfels, our movements, initiatives and intentions are preceded by things that happen to, befall or "af-fect" us by virtue of our existing in a shared world (*Mitwelt*) (Waldenfels, 2007). As part of a responsive nexus, I am called, or "af-fected", to respond to the other, or the term Waldenfels prefers, "the alien". Responding to the alien is

by no means limited to verbal expressions or even to human relations, but is a basic feature of all sensing, saying, and doing, of all embodied and motor sensory behavior and experience.

Conceiving subjects as incarnating a *bodily responsorium*, Waldenfels writes that "…my own body could be described as a half-alien body, charged by alien intentions, but also desires, projections, habits, affections, and violations, coming from others" (2011, p. 56). The logic of response and the phenomenology of the alien have radical implications for traditional (western) dualisms, such as self/other, mind/body and subject/object. Following Waldenfels, we recognize that we are never masters in, or of, our own house because the alien is already part of us. Foreignness or alienness, we learn, announces itself and solicits us on the level of the lived body in terms of pathos or affect, as a kind of pre-reflexive suffering or irritation. As Waldenfels observes, "We are touched by others before being able to ask who they are and what their expressions mean. The alienness of the Other overcomes and surprises us, disturbing our intentions before being understood in this or that sens'" (2011, p. 53). Radically, the "experience of the alien" points to a becoming-alien of experience and thus a becoming-alien of oneself (Waldenfels, 1990, p. 23). This crossing of boundaries or thresholds between self and other opens up new and important perspectives on ethical and political aspects of our relational co-existence and notions of selfhood. As Friesen shows, Waldenfels' responsive phenomenology of the alien can also help us better understand what it means to be online.

Digital worlds and hyper (dis)connectivity

The authors collected in the special issue explore *Being Online* in new and unexpected ways, focusing mainly on educational and pedagogical contexts, while still treading the broader path of questions concerning technology. In the opening editorial, editors Friesen and Irwin warn against following Heidegger uncritically down this path, especially in light of the recently published *Black Notebooks*, with their disturbing pronouncements against the "tenacious destiny" of "world Jewry". While this word of warning is important, reading on we see that none of the contributors follow "Heidegger's way" very closely, despite employing some of his concepts and basic ideas as starting points.

The opening article by Rose and Adams, "Will I Ever Connect with the Students?" Online teaching and the pedagogy of care", is one such example. It begins in Heideggerian territory but quickly veers off in search of ethical insights for which the "philosopher of Being" (and onetime *or* lifelong Nazi) may not be the best guide. As with the other articles in the special issue, the authors are driven by penetrating questions that speak directly to our digital zeitgeist, especially to those who are engaged pedagogically within it. These questions essentially revolve around the qualitative differences between online and face-to-face education and the ethical implications the different modes engender. While the case under discussion is the university context, it is easy to extrapolate such issues to broader lifeworld realities in which *Being Online* is now almost ubiquitous. That said, we should be careful not to overlook the global digital divide (Qureshi, 2014), which means, to put it in "Heideggerese", that greater numbers of people still experience *being-offline-in-the-world*. There are also significant differences in Internet usage among populations, as well as different skill levels among international students and migrants, as Derek Tannis' article, "Technology Help Seeking and Help Giving in an Intercultural Community of Student Life" explores.

Nevertheless, reading the sections in Rose and Adam's article entitled, "The Tyranny of Availability" and "The Demanding Student", I found the quotes by teachers and the reflections all too familiar. For instance, the authors discuss how today the Internet has opened up the possibility or expectation of teachers being available to students 24/7 (p. 8). While it can certainly appear this way, especially for the younger, digital generations, it is important not to simply equate the *possibility* of such contact with reality, however real this possibility may

appear. As Edward Casey (2012, p. 175) critically observes, digital technologies foster an "illusion of omnipresent availability", described as the false notion that others are available to me merely because I am equipped with wireless technologies. As Rose and Adams found, online teachers complain of often feeling bombarded, "under siege" from a "cacophony of student voices coming from all directions at once" (p. 9).

Reading the testimonies of teachers who stay up late at night, responding to student emails or even chatting with them online seemingly against their will, the article raises implicit questions of agency and responsivity in our online-oriented world(s). As one who teaches at a university in the process of shifting towards a predominately online environment, I know from experience that if limits are not set and actively practiced, communication with online students can easily become excessively disruptive. Reading the teachers' reflections, however, I wondered whether they were perhaps new to online teaching, for it seemed to me that a reflexive practitioner with some experience would have acquired strategies of resistance to the "tyranny of availability."

An ethos of *Gelassenheit* for the age of 'digital Ge-stell'

One strategy that comes to mind is simply logging off and staying out, the digital equivalent of clearing your desk and calling it a day. Reflecting on the article and the issue in general, I was led to think that the phenomenology of practice and *phenomenology as practice* can play a useful role in addressing the twenty-first century problems involved in *Being Online*. Cultivating the practice of *epoché* – the bracketing or suspension of the by now "natural attitude" towards our digital technologies - is one way we can prevent being "used" by them and resist becoming passive functionaries of a standing reserve, enframed by these and by neoliberal capitalism. This involves stepping back and observing our engrained technological habits, routines and almost ceaseless absorption with contemporary ICTs. Developing such a mindful, reflexive stance does not mean aspiring to a life free from advanced technologies, but instead leading a life that is not pervasively ordered by them. Phenomenologists, especially those who focus on embodied practice, are particularly well positioned to carry out such exercises, which are akin to Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit*, and to share their practical insights and critical practices with others.

Gelassenheit, translated as releasement, letting-go, serenity, composure, or detachment, refers to a non-objectifying ethos of active and ongoing passivity. As an accepting mode of *being-(present)-in-the-world*, *Gelassenheit* implies an abandonment of habitual, representational, and appropriating orientations. In the mode of letting-be of things, *Dasein* does not attempt to manipulate, master or control things, but instead lets things and phenomena be what they are in their own vital natures. Importantly, *Gelassenheit* is not indifference or lack of interest in things, but rather an "engaged letting". Entering a modus of letting-be is realized, for example, through a receptive waiting and deep listening. As such it is more an active non-doing, or the exercising of a negative capacity (the freedom to not do), rather than a willing or manipulating. Specifically, *Gelassenheit* shifts from the representational, instrumental, and calculative modes so prevalent in our technological era, towards more poetic relations mediated via ways of presencing and meditative thinking. Thereby, an ethos of *Gelassenheit* discourages mindless organising, technologically ordered functioning, easy consumption or exploitive orientations of hyper-mobile rushing, and instead encourages mindful practice.[i]

As each contribution to the special issue emphasizes, far from being a purely mental or cognitive event, our experiences with ICTs are significantly expanded when understood on the level of the lived body. It goes without saying that the mind is an embodied mind (Varela et al, 1991). Embodiment, as Merleau-Ponty observed, is always already "toolic" and "equipmental". As such, there is a reciprocal relationship between bodies and technologies.

Post-phenomenologists or post-humanists, such as Don Ihde and Donna Haraway, take this to its logical extreme when they claim that technologies are not mediations or things standing between us and the world, but are "organs", "full partners…infolded into the flesh" (Haraway, 2008, p. 249). Similarly, Ihde (2001) argues that insofar as technology is used or employed by human agents, these agents are also used and employed by technology. In as much as the lived body is the ground, or medium, for all experiences, including those involved in *Being Online*, the use of technologies is never disembodied.

However, this does not mean that technologies and virtual spaces are neutral; they profoundly condition and transform our experiences of places, and our relations to others and to ourselves. As sociologists Urry and Elliot (2010) note, subjects do not just use or activate digital technologies in everyday life; they become deeply layered within and reshaped by the influence of technological networks. And yet, this does not mean that technology has to be seen necessarily as alienating humans from a presumed originary or authentic nature. If technology is an extension of man, and the human is imagined as an ensemble of organs with technology as the sum of prostheses, *homo faber* would become a "technological animal", forever working on the extension of its radius of action and the optimisation of its artificial organs (Ihde, 2001). Philosophical anthropologist Helmuth Plessner had already articulated such an idea in the 1920s when he suggested that by virtue of their unique "ec-centric positionality", human beings are "artificial by nature".

Reflecting on technology as a form of embodied practice means not only thinking in terms of what subjects actively do online, but also in terms of the ways in which they respond, inter-act, and become coupled with(in) online environments and ICTs. As Friesen's article "Telepresence and Tele-absence: A Phenomenology of the Invisible Alien Online" demonstrates, Waldenfels' responsive phenomenology marks a significant opening for thinking about key issues of online experience, such as presence-absence, altered spatiality, and mediation and representation. While there is clearly much more to say on this, there are a few further responses I wish to make to Rose and Adam's article.

For whom does *Dasein* care?

Framed as a "pedagogy of care", the authors begin by introducing Heidegger's notion of care as *Dasein's* concern for its own existence (*Sorge*) and its "concernful solicitude" for others (*Fürsorge*) as part of a relational "being with" (*Mitsein*). Aside from this basic preliminary, Heidegger's conception of care is not followed up, which left this reader with several questions. First, while a connection is drawn between care for one's own existence and for that of others, what is the status of their relation? To answer this we must ask the more basic question, what exactly does Heidegger mean by care?

In *Being and Time*, the concept of care is used in a purely ontological-existential sense. Specifically, care describes the originary temporal structure of *Dasein's* existence, which is always projecting ahead of itself into new, meaningful possibilities. Concernful solicitude for others (*Fürsorge*) is part of this temporal structure, yet Heidegger's account of *Dasein's* relation to others is undeveloped, as Sartre argued in *Being and Nothingness* (1943/1956). While *Dasein's* ethical obligations to others is not explicated by Heidegger, McMullin (2013) has argued recently that an implicit ethics can be read between the lines of Heidegger's conception of *Fürsorge* and his analysis of authentic and inauthentic care. Stolorow (2014, p. 163) similarly shows how Heideggerian solicitude bears a close resemblance to Kant's concept of respect: the ethical implication is centred on the immediate claims others make on us.

The question Rose and Adams ask is:

> Can we extrapolate from Heidegger's notion of being-in-the-world to say that, for online university instructors, being-in-an-online course is also a matter of entering into a 'being-with' relationship of care and solicitude in which instructors and those with whom they form caring relationships are revealed? Or are online teachers' relations with students more akin to Heidegger's (1977) 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 fulfil instrumental intentions and desires? (p. 6)

These questions are important ones indeed, which I think Heidegger can take us at least part way in answering. To be sure, being-online-with students can be called a kind of digitally mediated being-with. Yet unlike intercorporeal encounters, this twenty-first century version of *mitsein* is deterritorialized and de-temporalized. Nevertheless, being-online-with-Others retains some basic features of original *mitsein*; at the very least there is still a mutual recognition of other Beings. We acknowledge the existence of these online Others because they send us messages, photos, and images, and they have names (real or pseudonyms, as Adams discusses in her article, "What's in a Name? The Experience of the Other in Online Classrooms"). But these phenomena not only signal the existence of Others, wherever they are, they also solicit and place demands on me that bind me. Faced by the online inter-face, I am, as Waldenfels would say, af-fected or called to respond.

In a basic and altered sense, we can thus say that Heidegger's existential-ontological conception of care shows up in the event of *Being Online*. But the quality of care is a question for which Heidegger offers little help. This explains why Rose and Adams look to Noddings (2003), a feminist philosopher of education, who builds on a Heideggerian understanding of care while adding an ethical dimension (especially in relation to pedagogy). This is also why, in my view, Levinas, who receives brief mention in the article, would be the one to ask about the ethics of *Being Online*. Reading the special issue, I was led to wonder if, ironically, Levinas might be a key thinker in the phenomenology of the information age. Ironically because the face-to-face encounter, which for Levinas is the fundamental ethical experience, is precisely what is profoundly disrupted and neglected in our online worlds. For Levinas (1985), it is the human face that orders and ordains us, calls us into giving and serving Others; '[t]he dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face' (p. 78), unlike what we encounter in so much of our online communication:

> The face speaks. It speaks, it is in this that it renders possible and begins all discourse.... The first word of the face is the 'Thou shalt not kill.' It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me (Levinas, 1985, p. 87-89).

Writing along Levinasian lines in relation to wireless technologies, Casey (2012) argues that there is an "irreplaceable value" of being with Others in an embodied, face-to-face manner by virtue of being in the same place:

> There is simply no substitute for the nuanced reading of the other's face and indeed, his or her whole body … expressions and dialogues made possible by being in the presence of a person are of an intricacy and scope that simply cannot be experienced otherwise (p. 175).

As Adams and Rose's article, and the special issue as a whole, observes, a central challenge of a technologically-enframed social order is the threat it poses to the human capacity to offer and experience genuine care. Levinasian reflections on what is lost when face-to-face

encounters suffer neglect in hyper (dis)connected worlds can help us understand the ethical implications of *Being Online*. Reflecting on and experimenting with how technologies alter the event of being-in-the-world, the phenomenology of practice, and *phenomenology as practice,* can play an important role in facing the challenges of the twenty-first century.

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[i] Heidegger problematized the technological-scientific-industrial modes, and what he calls "calculative thinking" - a restless thinking directed toward manipulation, toward obtaining some specific result - in contrast to a meditative mode. It is meditative thinking, however, that requires patience and silence, being as well as doing. It requires that we somehow stop and recollect ourselves. It requires conditions in which we can practice innocent looking and listening, the kind of awareness that we experience when we truly, unselfishly love someone or something – when we love the truth. For real thinking depends on openness, openness to whatever is in front of us. And it must start with what is closest – our own being. It is only then, when we are truly open to ourselves, that what is true can enter our perception and reveal itself fully to us. It is only then that we can go beyond the "stimulus-response" mode of living, a mode of living that is suited to machines not people. Through *Gelassenheit* it may be possible to suspend or silence habitual and calculative modes of thinking and open to the promptings that come from the ontological depth of Other beings. This openness clears a space for the Being of the Other to emerge as it is in itself. In preserving the Other's irreducible Otherness, we preserve our own integrity and deepen our experience of self and Other. *Gelassenheit* means to step back out of representational thinking into a kind of thinking that is not in a hurry to impose its ordering and calculations on things—it is not on a mission to follow the modernist project of putting questions to nature and forcing her to answer or to be used or exploited.

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