

The Myth of Being Virtual : On the Question of Identity in Cyber Space

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***Abstract :** In recent years, social media has evolved as a major means of communication. Since, there is no real human to human contact is necessary in such communications, the identity of the persons in cyber space becomes problematic. The cyber space per se becomes incapable of establishing the authenticity of the cyber/virtual identity. In the real world, even if we accept that there is a real identity, the extent to which it is reflected in the conceived, projected or perceived identity is in question. In the analysis of the notions of identity, uniqueness can be attributed to identity only as the unique convergence of multiple identities. The notion of virtual is not unique to the cyber space but exists in various forms in arts and literature. It follows that the distinction between real and virtual is relative and what we consider as virtual or real is only a matter of convention. There, however, are ethical concerns and the best means to get relieved from these concerns is to educate about it.*

***Keywords :** Identity, Cyber space, Virtual identity, Cyber ethics.*

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Introduction

Man, ever since the invention of tools, have been modifying his environment to meet his demands. The advancements in science and technology enabled him to accelerate this process of transformation to the extent that what is natural is now a dream. Advancements, especially in the digital technology, has made human interaction that is irreversibly dependent on digital communication. The technological advancements that are able to power the virtual worlds are accelerating and we are more and more immersed in this virtual world. Social media such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter and LinkedIn are extensively used by public to share textual, audio, image as well as video information. In communicating through social media, the 'real' person is always left behind, and the projected personality may either be anonymous, fake or real.

The possibility of making online identity anonymous or fake is obviously a problem in dealing with social media. This online identity that is not apparently revealed, in contrast with the real one, may be called *virtual identity*. The possibility of virtual identity being distinct from the real one makes it apparently less authentic, with which the social discourse gets problematized. This paper is intended to inquire into the nature of virtual identity, its authenticity and issues related to social discourse.

Before getting into the nature and issues related to virtual identity, some preliminaries about the notion of identity that are relevant in this context need to be stated.

Identity

The quest for identity is necessarily the quest to answer the question "Who am I?" The question is crucial in determining one's perception and actions that emanate from two distinct but related aspects of identity namely social identity and personal identity. The social identity contributes towards the inclusion of an individual within a social group while one's personal identity, neglecting the physical identity, determines his/ her role within a social group. The quest for identity is not limited to one's own identity, but that of others' too. The knowledge of other's identity is crucial in social interaction. It may be observed that in social interaction, where we need to communicate with a stranger, we are eager to locate the identity of the stranger before we can meaningfully communicate with her/ him. The environment as well as the person mutually determines the identity of the individual (Mead, 1934, p. 374). The need to locate one's social identity is necessary since the social identity determines the categories of understanding or the social ontology

of that individual (Rafael Capurro, 2013, p. 85). Any meaningful dialogue is possible only if we are able to understand these categories. Misunderstanding of social or personal identity leads to conflicts. The self-identity, the role one is supposed to assume in a system, if misconceived, can lead to conflicts in discourses and in social life. Hence, identifying the identity is crucial in social life.

The identity, both social and personal, may be located at four different levels;

- a) Real/ original identity: The true nature of the self.
- b) Conceived identity: The identity as understood by oneself.
- c) Projected identity: The identity projected for others (often concealing different aspects).
- d) Perceived identity: The identity as understood by others.

As we have already noted, misconception of identity leads to conflicts. This idea forms much of the teachings of Eastern philosophy in general that the wrong identification of the self with not-self is the cause of sufferings (Upanishads, Samkhya-Yoga etc.). Here the misunderstanding is between the real/ original identity and the conceived identity. This, however, is not much revealed in social life, since the original here is often transcendental while the conceived is empirical. The social situation deals with the empirical one rather than the transcendental one.

The disparity between the conceived and the projected identity can be seen as a major source of social conflicts. This leads to the misunderstandings in social relations and communication. The gravity of such misunderstanding is a correlate of the distinction between the projected identity and conceived/ perceived identity. The possibility of manipulation of identity as fake or anonymous identity has gone high with the advancement in technologies and the evolution of Social Networking Services (SNS). The SNS enable one to interact in the social media either by concealing one's identity as anonymous or by projecting a fake identity. This ought to make the identification of identity in SNS (virtual identity) problematic. This problematic nature of virtual identity (VID) raises various questions such as;

- a) How far can the VID represent the Real/ original or conceived ID?
- b) How far the VID can be authentic in social discourses through social media?
- c) Can VID be multiple IDs? If so, can the use of multiple ID be justified in discourses?

- d) If the use of multiple ID can be justified, how is it related to the Real/ original ID?

These philosophical questions are those apart from the technical questions in cyber world such as: “How can we trace the real ID of a VID?” and “How the usage of multiple IDs can be avoided?”.

The technical questions related to identity fixation is relatively easy to answer and fix and is growing towards more specificity with the advancement of technology, while the philosophical questions related to identity in the cyber world are getting more and more problematized.

Before attempting to answer the philosophical questions related to virtual/online identity, some key issues regarding identity in general need to be examined. Those aspects that require clarifications are;

- (i) Is there a real/ original/ immutable identity?
- (ii) If at all there is a real identity, is the conceived identity necessarily the real one?
- (iii) Is multiple identity possible in everyday life?
- (iv) If multiple ID is possible, can the perceived shift in ID distort the discourses?
- (v) Can the perceived ID leads to the distorted view of the discourse?

We may take up these questions one by one.

Gender, religion and nationality are some of the identities imposed on us by birth. These elements of identity can be seen as not essential but contingent to aspects of our existence. There is nothing that hinders us from conceiving that we could have been otherwise without altering from the personal identity (the role) we have. This leads to the quest for an identity that transcends our gender, religion, nationality and the like. Is there an ‘I’ that exist beyond these empirical qualifications? Some philosophers, especially the Eastern one, speak about such a transcendental self. But on further analysis it can be seen that such a self, be it *Âtman*, soul or pure-consciousness, is devoid of specific identity and is universal in nature. Identity without specificity/ difference is inconceivable at least in an empirical sense. Hence, if at all a real self exists with its unique identity, it must be constituted out of difference. It is all those features like gender, religion, nationality and other physical and psychological attributes that constitute personal identity that constitute the identity of the individual. Hence, identity is constituted, constituted out of difference and *what it is* is not determined merely by itself, but

by *the other* too. Thus it follows that the identity cannot be immutable; even a small change in the other ought to alter the identity of self.

The real and immutable identity, if accepted for the sake of argument, need not necessarily be the identity that is conceived or experienced by the subject herself. This must be so as the conception or experience is a matter of ascribing meaning and, following structuralism and post-structuralism, we know that meaning is always related. In conceiving one's own identity, it is not only the constituting factors of one's identity, but the 'others' contribute towards it. Hence it follows that identity is never substantive but always relational.

The unique identity of an individual then is always in question. The uniqueness of identity cannot be treated as anything other than the converging point of multiple constituting factors of identity. Thus, the identity of an individual is determined by her belonging to a group and since one can belong to different groups at the same time, the multiple nature of identity is obvious. Since personal identity is a function of role in a group, this too is multiple. Hence uniqueness can be attributed to identity only as the unique convergence of multiple identities.

Can there be a true or objective perception of identity of others? The answer is obviously "No". As in the case of self-identity, the identity of other is also perceived with distortion. This distortion is not limited to other's identity alone. The perceived identity distorts the meaning of discourse too. The content of a statement in a discourse is conceived as a function of the identity of the one who makes the statement. Hence the awareness of identity can not only make the discourse meaningful but also can distort it.

Virtual Identity: Nature Issues and Concerns

The term virtual identity is in contrast with real/ physical identity. This refers to the identity expressed in cyber space. The VID here is specifically focused on the identity in social media provided by Social Networking Services. While what we believe real identity exist necessarily in space and time, the VID is non-spatial and often non-temporal. The non-spatiality of VID come out of the non-spatial nature of cyber space (Floridi, 1999, p. 62). The VID also share the ubiquitous nature of cyberspace as many people around the world can communicate with one and the same VID at the same time while being at different places. This ubiquity is alien to the physical self. The VID is also non-temporal. Even after the death of the physical self, the VID can exist in the cyberspace as accessible to others, though the interaction in response may be possible only with the avatars(Blascovich & Bailenson, 2011). Hence it can be seen that the digital self or the VID is able to

transcend the limitations of the physical/ real self. The physical self, however, is considered to be the ‘real’ self and the VID is often used to enhance the potentialities of the physical self. This quest to enhance the limitations of self has been seen throughout the history of humanity from the time of invention of tools or even earlier (we will soon take up the earlier version).

The Quest for a Virtual World

While tools and technology from Stone Age to the Age of Information enabled humans to transcend the limitations to achieve the dreams, either physically or virtually, the potentiation with tools is not the sole way in which human beings learned to transcend their limitations. The journey into the virtual world itself is a means to transcend the human limitations. This journey into the virtual world is taken up through various means by humans from ancient period onwards and the distinction between real and virtual is relative(Blascovich & Bailenson, 2011).

Humans contrast what is usually considered “grounded reality”—what they believe to be the “natural” or “physical” world—with all other “virtual realities” they experience, such as dreams, literature, cartoons, movies, and online environments such as Facebook or Second Life.

.....It takes only a moment’s reflection to realize that the distinction between “grounded” and “virtual” is often arbitrary—humans move between them.

The journey to virtual reality starts with storytelling. Storytelling is a means by which we are taken to a virtual world where we get many of our needs satisfied. And it is obvious that even before the man made virtual reality storytelling began there existed a natural way of journey into the virtual world; that is dreams. The study on dream analysis by Sigmund Freud explains dream as a *wish* fulfilling activity(Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900-1998). Freud finds that, sleep fulfils one of the necessary conditions for psychosis in the sense that it is turning away from reality(Freud, *An Outline of Psycho-Analysis*, 1940-1949). Hence sleep and dreams as our natural activity and storytelling as an ancient means represents our journey into the virtual world.

With the use of tools, humans are able to create their own virtual worlds through graphics and paintings and then through sculpture. These art forms, according to Freud, enables the individual to release the repressed thoughts and the brutal instincts of the id. In the search for the virtual reality, man then started theatre shows, where stories, paintings, sculpture and actors took part simultaneously to imitate the reality and to transcend its limits. The next was the turn of paper manuscripts and then that of photography. From photography, the technology took

humanity to the world of cinematography, where a virtual world is created as it could not be done before.

Virtual reality moved farther away from reality with the invention of wireless technology and the beginning of radio broadcasting. In radio broadcasting, the real is left behind and is accessed through the virtual voice. The invention of television enhanced the capabilities of radio by incorporating the visuals along with the audio and thus making the virtual more real. A revolutionary turn in making the virtual world was made possible through the invention of computer and internet.

Is the Virtual Virtual?

As mentioned earlier, the distinction between real and virtual is relative. While conversing through a mobile phone, if someone ask us who is there, we reply that “That’s Jim” as if we are referring to the real person. It will be strange to respond as “I’m conversing with the digitalised sound of Mr Jim”. But the same could have been a purely virtual reality if it wold have been a few centuries back. The way in which we come in contact with reality and the way we ascribe reality to the form of contact is only a matter of convention.

Following Immanuel Kant, we may accept that our contact with the real world is only virtual. We can never know how the noumenon, the thing in itself, will look like. The phenomenal world is a virtual world that makes us the real world accessible. But that does not make the phenomenal less real in an empirical sense. The notion of *extended consciousness*, developed by Antonio Damasio enables one to think of oneself being extended beyond the body (Damasio, 1999, p. 23). If instruments like pen looking glass and hearing aids are means by which we grasp reality, they cannot be told as giving us a form of virtual reality. For, if they are giving us virtual reality, our very sense experience becomes virtual.

The cyber world enables us to go farther to extend ourselves to the world which is inaccessible otherwise. Real too is no ‘Real’ as we never come across with what a person really is but only with how he/ she is presented to us. To consider it as virtual or real is only a matter of convention.

Identity Issues in SNS

In the initial analysis we have seen that there is no immutable identity and multiple identity is a reality. Following the psychological traditions, we know that many aspects of our identity are concealed in social interaction. It is also seen that the awareness about identity of the speaker can influence the communication both positively and negatively.

Looking positively, can the anonymous identity makes discourses more objective? Anonymity, anyway, is not the contribution of information age. Pseudonyms were used anonymously even 2500 years before (Kokswijk, 2007, p. 22). Nick names were used by authors throughout the history of literature. The non-awareness of the identity of author, of course, will help in approaching the issue objectively.

Fake identities are not always fake. They are the hidden elements of one's identity that cannot directly be expressed in society. Such identities ranges from apparently harmless one to the socially unacceptable one. For example, the Facebook profile names of many young Keralaits includes their caste name also (of course those belonging to higher class leads the issue, while a few of those belonging to lower caste use it as a protest against the new trend) which they do not generally declare in society. The elements of identities that are otherwise hidden are finding their expression in SNS as VID. Positively taken, this is nothing but the creative expressions of the constituting elements of one's identity. Thus the VID provides the individual to be uniquely authentic.

Finally, a concern for ethics. How anonymity and fakes will affect the real world? Is it ethically permissible to behave someone as what he/ she *is*, to the extent that it affects the legal and moral interests of the society? The solution to the 'misbehaving' in virtual/ cyber world lies in educating about the cyber world. Nothing in the cyber world goes unregistered and undetectable, while things may go unregistered and undetectable in real world. For example if you move around with your mobile location on then the 'Google' has every trace of your movement in <https://maps.google.com/locationhistory>. The one who is aware of the functioning of the cyber space cannot act against the interest of society unless he/ she is acting against his/ her interests. The best means to get relieved from the concerns of VID is thus educating about it.

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