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Being-with Others Online: A Heideggerian Analysis & Nancian Critique

of the Authentic Self in the Digital World

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ABSTRACT

Being-with Others Online: A Heideggerian Analysis & Nancian Critique

of the Authentic Self in the Digital World

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This paper contributes to discussions of authenticity and self-creation in the digital world by giving a critical ontological analysis of experience therein. Through Jean-Luc Nancy's ontology, grounded in and critical of Martin Heidegger's analysis of Dasein, it analyzes the ways in which the self emerges through its encounter with others in digital contexts. It brings Heideggerian and Nancian concepts pertaining to their understandings of the essential relationality of the human being alongside psychological and sociological work on online experience, showing that digital technologies do not so much radically alter the human experience as modulate already fundamental aspects of it. Ultimately, by arriving at Nancy's ontological concept of *touching*, the possibility of an authentic self, arising through the use of digital technology, is critiqued as unobtainable, not because digital spaces specifically lack the ability to create authentic experience, but because all human experience finds itself between inauthenticity and authenticity. I am always only ever in the process, with others, of becoming an authentic self, a process I continue when I pick up my phone or open my computer. Thus, the "virtual," digital world is not a replica or image of the "real," physical one. It is itself a world in which I engage in the process of becoming myself—of reaching for an authentic self—with others.

Introduction: Approaching the Possibility of an Authentic Self in the Digital World

Technology is by now a constant aspect of the human experience. We do not create it superfluously, as merely an aide helping us to realize our desires and needs: it structures our experience. As Jean-Luc Nancy insists, "'I' always finds itself tightly squeezed in a wedge of technical possibilities" (Nancy 2008b, 163). In our current lives, technology has taken on incredible forms. We have used it to create novel places in which we are able to *be*, to exist, to interact with others. This is the digital world, the world online—a place where we can find ourselves, or rather, where the finding of ourselves can take place. The use of digital technologies to create identities and selves has only increased since their conception, and now, with our current crisis (the Covid-19 pandemic), this reliance on digital spaces and digital selves has become even more prevalent. Thus, when the only place for self-creation seems to be online, when I can only come face-to-face with another through a screen, I need to understand what exactly it means to be myself, and to be with others, in the domain of digital experience.[1]

Such an analysis of digital experience—specifically, of the ways in which we create ourselves online through interaction with others—must start from a general ontological theory of the human being. We must first understand what it means to be a human being before we can understand what it means to be a human being online.[2] For such a foundation we need look no further than the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. Here, we find a thinker reaching for an essential understanding of the human being. Through Nancy's ontology, grounded in and critical of Martin Heidegger's analysis of Dasein, we will be able to understand the ways in which the self emerges through its encounter with others. Heideggerian and Nancian concepts pertaining to their understandings of the fundamental relationality of the human being will in turn be brought alongside psychological and sociological work on online experience, namely, the work of Sherry

Turkle, Margaret Morris, and Zenyep Tufekci. Through this comparison of ontological theory with empirical accounts of digital experience, my paper will argue that a stable, authentic self is unachievable—in either digital or physical contexts. Thus, we should not condemn the digital world as an inherently inauthentic place in contrast to the "real." Rather, we should seek to create digital technologies that provide space for the ongoing, never completed process of becoming an authentic self with others.

In the first section, we will study digital experience in relation to Heidegger's general ontology. By noting how certain existential characteristics of Dasein are manifest within a digital context (i.e., being-with, the They, the theyself, the authentic self, leaping in, and leaping ahead), we will show that digital technology simply modulates this more fundamental ontological structure of the human being. We will understand the authenticity and inauthenticity of the digital self—that is, respectively, self-understanding that grasps or fails to grasp what is essential to oneself—not as being inherent consequences of digital technologies, but as fundamental ontological aspects of the human being that are merely facilitated, either way, by these devices.

In the second section, we will critique authenticity—as entailing a definitively authentic understanding of the self—by way of Nancy's revision of Heidegger's ontology. We will notice the paradoxical quality of authenticity in the encounter of the self with others. This encounter, for Nancy, is the *touching* of oneself and the other: the ontological moment where the self emerges precisely by its difference from others, being at the same moment distinct from and existentially interdependent with others. Consequently, we will move from understanding digital experience as a modulation of Heideggerian being-with to a modulation of Nancian touching. In so doing, we will understand digital interfaces as places for the touching of the self and the other, through which the opportunity arises to understand oneself not as determinately authentic and

stable—already established before using digital technology—but as always only ever approaching authenticity alongside others.

Preamble: On Digital Technology

Before we can understand our experience of ourselves and others as specifically mediated through digital technologies, we must first understand what digital technologies are—that is, specifically in the context of this paper, what digital technologies are as communicative and informational technologies that use digital infrastructures to mediate interpersonal human experience. "We have to love our technology enough to describe it accurately. And we have to love ourselves enough to confront technology's true effects on us" (Turkle 2011, 243). We must therefore take care not to misconceive of digital technologies as mere tools, objects we use simply for goals and projects that we have already laid out before us. As Zeynep Tufekci (2017) insists, we must avoid believing that "our intent in using a technology is all that counts […] Technology, too, has structuring power within its constraints…" (125). In other words, digital technologies—my phone, laptop, and the applications that run on them—alter my possibilities for being in the world and interacting with others, beyond how I use them for simply realizing possibilities that I have already noticed. I do not merely use them for connecting with others in ways on which I have already decided. They, in turn, shape my encounter with others. "Digital technologies of connectivity affect how we experience space and time; they alter the architecture of the world—connecting people who are not physically near, preserving words and pictures that would otherwise have been ephemeral and lost to time" (122). My experience of others is changed by digital technologies in ways affecting my very approach to relating to them.

This alteration to human experience is not, however, fundamental. "Technology rarely generates absolutely novel human behavior; rather, it changes the terrain on which such behavior takes place" (Tufekci 2017, 131). The world created by digital technologies in which I find myself with others—the online world—may be novel in many respects, but my experience of it is ontologically comparable to my experience in general. In other words, digital technologies alter my experience, but not its fundamental characteristics. The general ontological structure of the experience of my world remains intact throughout its digital modulation.

We may therefore apply a general ontological understanding of human experience to the specific case of experience as mediated through digital technology. In fact, applying such an ontological analysis to our experience where digital technology is concerned is necessary if we want to understand our relation to it. As Heidegger will say, "the essence of technology is by no means anything technological. Thus, we shall never experience our relationship to the essence of technology so long as we merely conceive and push forward the technological, put up with it, or evade it" (Heidegger 1977, 4). We must understand our relation to technology and how it shapes our relations to others by first understanding the general human experience that it modulates.[3]

§1 – Being-with Others Online: Heidegger's Authentic Self in the Digital World

We may now turn to Heidegger's analytic of Dasein, since it is of such a general, universal ontological character. It is universal in the sense that it describes the structure of *all* human experience, and thus with it we can understand human experience as modulated through digital technology specifically. Through this Heideggerian analysis, we will consider the possibility of an authentic self in digital space, which will then be critiqued later, via Nancy's treatment of Heidegger's ontology.

§1.1 – *Mitsein: Being-with Others in the Digital World*

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger states that an essential element of the structure of Dasein is that it is with others in its world. Dasein "is *Being-with* Others": *Mitsein* (*BT*, 155 G118).[4] This, for Heidegger, is not merely a physical fact about my experience. It is not simply that I encounter others in my world objectively, but that the very structure of my experience implies that I am with others. "This Being-there-too […] with them does not have the ontological character of a Being-present-at-hand-along-'with' them within a world. This 'with' is something of the character of Dasein…" (*BT*, 154 G118). In other words, Being-with others is an inherent attribute of Dasein and must "be understood *existentially*, not categorically" (*BT*, 154-5 G118).

In this way, even when it is modulated by digital technology, Dasein is *Mitsein*. To be human is to be with others in the world, whether it is physical or digital. "As Being-with, Dasein 'is' *essentially* for the sake of Others" (*BT*, 160 G123, emphasis added). As a human being, all that I do is in constant relation to others. Thus, the care I take for things on the screen—for the media, comments, and posts that I scroll through—is always surrounded by the care of others.

§1.3 – *The They: Everyday Being-with Others in the Digital World*

Heidegger notes that this being-with of Dasein takes a typical form. For everyday unreflective Dasein, "there is constant care as to the way one differs from [others], whether that difference is merely one that is to be evened out, whether one's own Dasein has lagged behind the Others and wants to catch up in relationship to them, or whether one's Dasein already has some priority over them and sets out to keep them suppressed" (*BT*, 163-4 G126). Dasein, in its usual mode of being-with, defers itself to the care others take and compares its care with theirs. In this

unreflective mode of being-with, "what is decisive is just that inconspicuous domination by Others […] One belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power" (*BT*, 164 G126).

These others to whom Dasein belongs in its everydayness are not necessarily objectively next to Dasein in its world. They are "not this one, not that one, not oneself […], not some people […], and not the sum of them all. [They are] the neuter, *the 'they'…*" (*BT*, 164 G126). The They is not someone else specifically. It "*is an existentiale*; *and as a primordial phenomenon, it belongs to Dasein's positive constitution*" (*BT*, 167 G129). The They constitutes Dasein itself. It is the unreflective mode of being-with others as an essential element of Dasein.

The They is the mode of being-with of Dasein that determines for itself how it should act according to what is normal—according to what the average person, anyone, would do. The They, "concerns itself as such with *averageness…*" (*BT*, 164 G127). This fixation on normality, in turn, closes Dasein off from other ways of being. Thus, the They indicates "an essential tendency of Dasein which we call the 'leveling down' […] of all possibilities of Being" (*BT*, 165 G127). Dasein, as everyday being-with, assumes an ordinary way of caring for things. It levels down or reduces the ways it could interact with the world to whatever is determined as normal.

Thus, in the typical way of being online—as everyday Dasein, being-with others—I allow the care of others to dictate to me how I should understand the phenomena with which I am presented on the screen. My approaches to online situations are usually determined by my assumptions about how others view them. Even when I am online, I find myself in the everyday mode of being-with others in the They.

But we must note that although the They—an element of my very being—inflects my experience of the digital world, digital technology itself can afford me more or less of this opportunity. Not only do I bring my everyday preoccupation with others in the They into the

digital world, but digital technology itself can make the care others take in the world more available—or obvious—to me. "Today, cellphone in hand, other-directedness is raised to a higher power. At the moment of beginning to have a thought or feeling, we can have it validated, almost prevalidated" (Turkle 2011, 177). As Sherry Turkle notes, the screens I am surrounded by give me constant access to the care that others take in the world. Their thoughts, opinions, and actions can be solicited at the click of a button. This alteration of my experience, where now others are tele-present with me at every moment, being able to react in real time and affect my experience, gives me the opportunity to reinforce my everyday being-with others in the They. Generally, even without others actually present, I am still directed toward them by assuming through my actions an average way of being. Now, phone in hand, others are always mediately "present," and so I can more viscerally preoccupy myself with the averageness their presence assumes. I can more easily level myself down to a normal way of being in the They, with the help of digital technology as a modulator of human experience.

§1.4 – *The Theyself: The Inauthentic Self in the Digital World*

Heidegger contrasts the busy, alienated self that arises from the They to an authentic self: "The self of everyday Dasein is the *they-self*, which we distinguish from the *authentic Self*—that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way" (*BT*, 167 G129). To understand this decision, we must clarify what Heidegger means by the term authenticity. Here, an etymological exploration is helpful. The German term, *Eigentlichkeit*, stems from the root *eigen-*, meaning "own" as in "my own," *mein eigenes*. Authenticity has to do with what is one's own or ownmost. (In Nancy's analysis of authenticity, *mein eigenes* is *mon propre*, denoting one's own as what is ontologically "proper" or "appropriate" for them, as what is essential to their being.)

For Dasein specifically, authenticity is a matter of understanding. This is because Dasein is the being that takes care of its world, and Dasein takes care of beings in its world by seeking to grasp them in understanding. "Its own Being and the entities disclosed with its Being can be appropriated in understanding, or can remain relegated to non-understanding" (*BT*, 193 G151). It is therefore one's understanding—of a thing, or another, or oneself—that can be authentic or inauthentic. In understanding, I project meaning onto beings. I give them a purpose and value, setting them in relation with other beings in the world to which I do the same. If I grasp what is proper in a being—what is essential to it, its ownmost—then I have authentically understood it.[5]

Having clarified Heidegger's concept of authenticity, we may now return to his declaration that the theyself is inauthentic. Here, the self emerges specifically from Dasein's understanding of itself. By understanding itself in terms of the They, Dasein understands itself generically—by how anyone is, normally or usually—and does not attain an understanding of itself on its own terms. It has not "been taken hold of in its own way…"—in its ownmost being (*BT*, 167 G129). Instead, it has leveled itself down to merely what it is as determined in averageness, in the They, "which conceals the ownmost being of Dasein from itself" (*BT*, 220 G176).

The theyself may then be seen in its digital context as arising from and facilitated by the "turn to a hyper-other-directedness…" that digital technologies enable (Turkle 2011, 177). I understand myself inauthentically in terms of others' thoughts, opinions, and emotions, which digital technology can make constantly available to me. We must note, however, coming back to the nuanced relation we have with technology, that the theyself is not *caused* by digital technology. Rather, it is facilitated by it. The way that digital technologies allow others to be tele-present at any moment offers and indeed typically inundates me with opportunities to define

myself by comparison to others in the They. But the initial inclination to do so is found within me already, since I am essentially being-with others. "If there is an addiction here, it is not to a technology. It is to the habits of mind that technology allows us to practice" (288). I come to the digital world already with the habit of other-directedness, inclined toward being a theyself. It is just that, because of the contingencies of their design, digital technologies can afford me the opportunity to more thoroughly entrench my self-understanding in the They, as an inauthentic theyself.

Insofar as I allow this hyper-other-directedness—made possible for me by digital technology—to determine me in comparison with others as leveled down to averageness, I understand myself inauthentically, as a theyself. This inauthentic theyself online may then be characterized by the attributes that Heidegger gives it more generally: busyness and alienation.

The theyself is constantly busy. Although the They has subdued Dasein, limiting the scope of its possibilities for itself, it "does not seduce one into stagnation and inactivity, but drives one into uninhibited 'hustle' […] [Dasein] does not now somehow come to rest" (*BT*, 222 G177-8). The theyself, emerging from Dasein's inauthentic self-understanding, fixates Dasein's care onto its relation to others in the They, constantly concerning itself with them.

The theyself is also alienated from itself. "When Dasein, […] 'understanding' everything, thus compares itself with everything, it drifts along towards an alienation […] in which its ownmost potentiality-for-Being is hidden from it. [The They] is not only tempting and tranquillizing; it is at the same time *alienating*" (*BT*, 222 G178). As an inauthentic theyself, Dasein is at a distance from itself. Its ownmost being is hidden by the leveling down of the They, and, since Dasein *is* its ownmost, a rift within itself forms as the feeling of alienation.

Turkle (2011) presents us with such a busy, alienated theyself within a digital context:

Diane, thirty-six, […] cannot keep up with the pace set by her technology. […] 'When I move from calendar, to address book, to e-mail, to text messages, I feel like a master of the universe; everything is so efficient. I am a maximizing machine.' […] Diane, in the company of programs, feels herself 'a master of the universe.' Yet, she is only powerful enough to see herself as a 'maximizing machine' that responds to what the network throws at her. […] In a world of constant communication, […] she has become a machine for communicating, but she has no voice left for herself. (164-5)

Here is an inauthentic self whose experience is saturated by digital technology. Diane is constantly busy, being surrounded by her screens, which feed her the desires, thoughts, and opinions of others. This busyness is coupled with a numbness, in which she has lost touch with her own emotional and mental life. The demands of her digital technology require her to be constantly concerned with others insofar as they appear as objectively determined in emails and messages. She, in turn, is also reduced to a determinate "machine." This leaves her alienated. Understanding herself at a more fundamentally authentic level is a concern drowned out by the dinging of notifications on her smartphone. "If when on the net, people feel just 'alive enough' to be 'maximizing machines' for e-mails and messages, they have been demoted" (168).

This is not simply a matter of having too few hours in the day to spend on self-reflection. Rather, Diane fundamentally understands herself by means of the objective, determinate connections with others made possible by her digital technology. She is busy in the sense that time itself is determined for her by others.[6] She is alienated from herself because, within this digital experience, the They has concealed even the possibility of authentic self-understanding.

Ontologically, this busy, alienated theyself arises from Dasein understanding itself within the They—within the everyday being-with of Dasein, a mode of its fundamental structure. The

theyself is therefore inevitable. Dasein will always be drawn to understanding itself through a comparison to others in the They. An authentic self must therefore arise from within the inauthentic context in which it finds itself. "*Authentic Being-one's-Self* does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the 'they'…" (*BT*, 168 G130). Dasein understands its ownmost being by first understanding that it is enamoured with the They. It is from this realization that Dasein becomes aware of its ownmost possibilities. "*Authentic* existence is not something which floats above falling everydayness; existentially, it is only a modified way in which such everydayness is seized upon" (*BT*, 224 G179).

Diane's case was an example of the way in which digital technologies can modulate our determination of ourselves in the They with others, but just as these technologies afford us this opportunity, they may also offer us the chance to reveal the They and the theyself as inauthentic, and to encounter others in a way that reaches for authenticity instead. Rather than using digital technologies in a way that entrenches my understanding of myself in the They, as a theyself alienated from itself, I can instead use them to facilitate an authentic self-understanding.

§1.5 – Being-toward-death: The Authentic Self in the Digital World

Authentic self-understanding, however, is not easy to come by for Dasein. This is because Dasein's being is not fully contained within it as what is present. It is not simply what it is already. Its essential nature is dynamic, includes its possibilities, and stretches into its future. It "always exists in just such a manner that its 'not yet' *belongs* to it" (*BT*, 287 G243). In other words, I am not able to be grasped fully in what I am at present. To understand myself authentically, I must come to understand my openness to possibilities as an element of my very being. My *being* consists in *becoming*. I am indeterminate and open to my future. As such, "there

is *constantly something still to be settled*" within me (*BT*, 279 G236). This quality "is essentially opposed to the possibility of our getting it in our grasp" (*BT*, 276 G233).

But although Dasein is never complete, never finished and available for being fully comprehended, the process of existing—becoming, caring—that Dasein *is* is not endless. Dasein dies. By understanding itself as a dying being, Dasein can come to an understanding that gets a grip on itself in its wholeness. This understanding of Dasein does not see its death merely as a moment in the future, but as an immanent possibility for it. "Dying is not an event; it is a phenomenon to be understood existentially…" (*BT*, 284 G240). To be authentic, Dasein must come to understand itself in terms of its finitude. I am a dying being, here and now: I am finite.

There is much more to be said about the finitude of Dasein, but we will only note that in understanding itself as finite, Dasein comes to understand its "*ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped*" (*BT*, 294 G250-1). In authentic self-understanding, Dasein does not come to grasp itself objectively—as a corpse, the mere objective body. In being toward its own death, Dasein understands that its finitude is something that only it itself experiences and understands. Here, turning to others for self-understanding is not possible. One's finitude must be faced by oneself. It "individualizes Dasein down to itself. […] It makes manifest that all […] Being-with Others, will fail us when our ownmost potentiality-for-Being is the issue" (*BT*, 308 G263). Thus, the authentic self distinguishes itself: Dasein realizes itself as being essentially incomprehensible to others and reveals the They as failing to grasp it as a finite being.

Therefore, online, the authentic self has a self-understanding that goes beyond the objective determinations of its digital technologies. It knows that its posts, profiles, or accounts online do not exhaust its possibilities for being. They do not ultimately capture or quantify it. The authentic self in a digital context understands itself beyond the metrics of being merely an

efficiency-maximizing machine. Morris (2018) presents us with such a case, in which a person realizes themselves beyond the determinations that digital technology affords (in this case self-quantification, the use of digital tools to collect information about one's physical body):

> By reflecting on his self-tracking, Kaiton ultimately moved beyond increasing his control over fundamentals of nutrient intake and expenditure. As he examined the quantified measures of paths that he had walked on a given day […] he found himself imagining the paths not taken; he wondered about what might have happened […] Beyond the numbers, what might he have seen? And this led to speculation about other cities that he could walk through and friends he could meet on his explorations. (39)

Kaiton understood himself beyond what was quantified by his digital technologies. He used them not as ways to determine himself objectively, but as points of self-exploration opening onto the myriad of possibilities of his being. In this way, he used digital technologies to understand himself, not as an objectively determined being, but as a finite being—constantly becoming.

This authentic self-understanding did not come from an abstaining from digital technology. "Kaiton was successful because he was confident that he could adapt technology, just as he tailors his clothing. He assumed, correctly, that he could meld the appealing components of different systems and reject the rest" (Morris 2018, 38). Again, we are not simply shaped by digital technologies. We always also have the ability to shape our use of them, and to shape the digital world we create through them. This use may assist the defining of oneself in the They as determinable by others, but it may also open up onto a self-understanding that goes beyond the bounds of the They, and beyond the boundaries of digital technology itself where our own possibilities of being are concerned. "We confront the limitations of our devices, services, and apps. We realize that they are not perfect […] This disappointment with technology invites

us to bend it toward our own ends. Our focus shifts from the technology itself to larger goals and our relationships with others" (84). Thus, we may use our digital technologies in such a way that exposes their limits, realizing an authentic self beyond their bounds.

Returning to Heidegger, we may note again that although the authentic self understands itself apart from the They, it is nonetheless from its experience within the They that Dasein comes to this authentic self-understanding. Dasein experiences others and their deaths. Dasein sees the corpse of the other: their objective death. "In this way a termination […] of Dasein becomes 'Objectively' accessible. Dasein can thus gain an experience of death, all the more so because Dasein is essentially Being with Others." (*BT*, 281 G237). In this encounter, Dasein realizes its inability to comprehend the other's finitude for them. Dasein can do many things for the other, but Dasein cannot die for them. It must understand that here, "the authentic Being-come-to-an-end […] of the deceased is precisely the sort of thing which [Dasein does] *not* experience" (*BT*, 282 G238-9). Thus, Dasein realizes its essence as being beyond objective understanding precisely by being with others, whose own essences remains opaque to Dasein. In other words, I arrive at an authentic understanding of myself because I realize that I cannot come to an authentic understanding of others. The finitude of the other resists my understanding, and thus I come to understand my own finitude as incomprehensible to others.

Online, therefore, the authentic self does not understand itself as isolated from others. The other-directedness afforded here need not result in an impoverished theyself. Digital technologies can also facilitate a mode of being-with that allows for the failure of understanding between myself and others, leading to an authentic self. "We may initially procure connected devices for efficiency. But we use them relationally—to send and receive social signals. And sometimes these signals are more about visceral connections": mutable and indeterminate

relations with others (Morris 2018, 2). I am able to use digital technologies, as modulators of my experience, to encounter others in ways that do not level them down. Even if the other is framed within the screen, I am still always capable of understanding that who I encounter is a human being, ultimately incomprehensible from an objective perspective. I, in turn, understand myself in this light. I realize that like the other I am not bound by the screen. My possibilities outstrip what is prescribed by my technology's assumptions about the ways I should use it. It is always possible for me that, by turning to the other who I encounter through digital technology, I can rise above the averageness that it may facilitate. If I realize that the other I encounter online is ultimately incomprehensible, I can begin to ask questions concerning authenticity therein: "How can we shape our environments, both physical and digital, to focus our attention on what matters most to us? […] [How] do we want to architect the digital influences on our decisions?" (51).

§1.4 – Leaping In: Inauthentic Being-toward Others in the Digital World

We have seen that digital technologies may facilitate both an inauthentic leveling down of oneself to averageness in the They, and an authentic self-reflection that reveals one's ownmost possibility. "Digital tools are not uniform. Rather, they have a range of design affordances that facilitate different paths…" (Tufecki 2017, 55). As with our experience in general, in the digital world we are always capable of authentic or inauthentic self-understanding. But whichever mode of self-understanding we take, it always arises alongside our understanding of the other. With regard to digital experience, we must therefore inquire about the ways in which we can approach the other with digital technologies. How can I concern myself with others in the digital world?

To do so, we will return to *Being and Time*, where Heidegger describes the care that Dasein takes for others. Here, he distinguishes such care from the care of objects: others "are

themselves Dasein. These entities are not objects of concern, but rather of *solicitude*" (*BT*, 157 G121). Solicitude of others is thus juxtaposed to taking care of things since, for Dasein, others are not merely things. They are *Mitdasein*: Dasein with Dasein. They have the same finite structure of being as Dasein, and thus the same objective incomprehensibility as well.

The They therefore levels down others, just as it levels down Dasein itself, to an averageness that conceals their finitude. Within this mode, Dasein's concern for others is characterized by such a concealment. Dasein assumes that the other is understood in the They and commandeers their care for the world based on this assumption. Solicitude "can, as it were, take away 'care' from the Other and put itself in [their] position in concern: it can *leap in* for [them]" (*BT*, 158 G122). Leaping in for the other is the consequence of Dasein's inauthentic understanding of the other in the They, which "pertains for the most part to our concern with the ready-to-hand" (*BT*, 158 G122). In other words, in this mode of solicitude, Dasein understands and acts toward the other as though it were a mere thing with a determinable essence, an object.

This tendency to leap in for the other, to reduce the other to an object, may be facilitated by digital technologies. When using them, "we seem determined to give human qualities to objects and [are] content to treat each other as things" (Turkle 2011, xiv). The other appears to us not as a human body but mediated through an interface—through an object. The difference between others—otherwise inhabiting and moving through physical space in a way particularly unique to human beings—and things is blurred. In digital space, the screen or interface takes on emotional effects and others are experienced through it. Thus, digital technologies can enable my leaping in for the other, taking their care away and reducing them to an object for me.

In turn, by leaping in for the other, I myself am reduced to a thing. "Online, we invent ways of being with people that turn them into something close to objects. The self that treats a

person as a thing is vulnerable to seeing itself as one" (Turkle 2011, 168). When I care for the other only as they are contained within the bounds of the screen—within the 120 characters of the tweets they make or the borders of their social media profiles—I am not only reducing them to an object, I myself am leveled down and understood only within these bounds.

We must note that the leveling down of the other to a thing on the screen is an affordance made possible through the contingency of its design. The averageness we allow digital technologies to level us down to is, in part, assumed within their computational structure. This is understood in one way by Tufekci as the algorithmic determinacy of digital technologies. In other words, we have designed within digital technologies an importantly new mode of leveling down each other and ourselves: the algorithm, which "operates as a hidden shaper of the networked public space" (Tufecki 2017, 158). The algorithmic programming of digital technologies reduces our experience with them to quantifiable metrics. For example, it maximizes clicks and likes, showing us only what we are determined as wanting to see, which is already what we think others want us to see. Thus, the digital world "is not a flat, open space with no barriers and no structures" (162). We can be guided through it by its algorithmic architecture based on the assumption that we fit the mold of being an average user, that we want to act the way a user would want to act. Here, we have designed our digital technologies to level ourselves down to algorithmically determined average people. When we conceive of digital technology algorithmically in advance of our using it, we pre-emptively leap in for each other.

§1.5 – Leaping Ahead: Authentic Being-toward Others in the Digital World

Leaping in is not, however, the only possibility of caring for others within the digital world. Digital technology may also afford me the opportunity to respect the finitude and indeterminacy

of the other as outstripping the bounds of the interface in which they are presented. "We can use technology as a bridge, not a surrogate for" encountering the other (Morris 2018, 15). In this way, I approach the other as *Mitdasein*—another human being with me, taking care of the world.

This acknowledgement of and respect for the other's incomprehensibility is designated by Heidegger as leaping ahead of the other. "There is also the possibility of a kind of solicitude which does not so much leap in for the Other as *leap ahead* of [them] […] in [their] existentiell potentiality-for-Being, not in order to take away [their] 'care' but rather to give it back to [them] authentically as such…" (*BT*, 159 G122). Leaping ahead of the other is precisely an authentic understanding of one's relation to the other, as beyond the purview of the They. "This kind of solicitude pertains essentially to authentic care—that is, to the existence of the Other […] It helps the Other to become transparent to [themselves] *in* [their] care and to become *free for* it" (*BT*, 159 G122). Here, Dasein understands the other as incomprehensible. The other's care is not understood definitively but respected as being their own. In relating to others authentically, by leaping ahead of them, Dasein understands that the other surpasses its understanding.

Leaping ahead of the other with digital technology, I therefore respect the fullness of their experience, which cannot be captured by my devices or digital platforms. By using digital tools to encounter the other in this way, I am aware of their limits, which the other exceeds in their potentiality for being. Here, digital technology is understood as a facilitator of such a relation to the other, but it is not seen as initiating it. Leaping ahead of others online is predicated by an authentic understanding of the other that gives them space for their ownmost insuperable potentiality for being. This understanding of the other "has to go beyond technology. Among other things, we need a tolerance for uncertainty that our devices aren't likely to give us" (Morris 2018, 50). In other words, unlike the inauthentic understanding of the other as an object,

perpetuated by algorithmic digital technology, the authentic understanding of the other that informs our leaping ahead of them cannot be given to us directly by digital technology.

Moreover, an authentic understanding of oneself in digital experience is predicated on an authentic understanding of the other which leaps ahead of them through digital technology. Since I am fundamentally being-with others online, to understand myself authentically in the digital world, I must understand the relations I share with others through digital technology. For me to understand myself as a finite being, whose potentiality for being outstrips the bounds of the interfaces that curate my digital experience, I must understand and respect the other as the same.

<p align="center">* * *</p>

In this section, by understanding our digital experience in light of Heidegger's general ontology, we have realized that the structure of the digital world is fundamentally comparable to any world we find ourselves in, being simply a new modulation of our experience. Any human experience, including digital experience, has the character of being-with others, of being-with others in the They, and of the possibility of reaching an authentic understanding of oneself beyond the theyself. As a result, digital technologies are not functionally monolithic. They "are especially complex because they have a huge range of potential affordances…" (Tufecki 2017, 118). Digital technologies can facilitate many different ways of taking care of others in our world, from leaping in to leaping ahead and anything in between. We can, for instance, design digital spaces algorithmically, leveling down others and ourselves to determinate averageness— we can see the other merely as what is usefully presented on our screens—or we can respect the limitation of our digital tools, designing them to expose us to these limits, opening us up to an experience of the other that respects their objective incomprehensibility. Digital experience is therefore not inherently authentic or inauthentic but contains within it, as with any human

experience, the possibility of both. Consequently, creating and using digital technology is never a pre-determined activity. Here, "ethics, norms, identities, and compromise permeate all discussions and choices of design, affordances, policies, and algorithms…" (Tufekci 2017, 185). When we create and interact with digital technologies, we must choose to respect others as finite beings. Only if we understand others in this way can we understand ourselves authentically.

§2 – Touching Others Online: Nancy's Authentic Self in the Digital World

So far, by analyzing digital experience through Heidegger's ontology, we have shown that the structure of human experience is not radically altered but simply modulated by digital technology. As such, neither authenticity nor inauthenticity are inherent attributes of digital experience specifically but are always possibilities found within it. More to the point, we have arrived at the possibility of an authentic self within digital experience, a self that understands its own singular, insuperable, nonrelational finitude by respecting others.

In this section—by introducing Nancy, who is both indebted to and goes beyond Heidegger's existential analytic—we will show that definitive authenticity—in digital experience or otherwise—is unachievable. A determinate authentic self will be revealed as impossible and Nancy's ontology of touching will be introduced to complicate our analysis of digital experience as a modulation of the fundamental ontological structure of the human being.

§2.1 – The Paradox of Authenticity: Authenticity Beyond Authenticity

To begin, we will note the paradoxical quality of Heideggerian authenticity. Authenticity is a matter of fully understanding the essence of a being, but since Dasein itself is never completed in its being—never ready to be comprehended in an objective sense—Dasein's authentic

understanding of its ownmost essentiality is precisely its coming to recognize itself as finite and unfinished. For Heidegger, this self-understanding arises alongside an understanding of the other. I encounter the other as *Mitdasein*—as a being like me—and realize that they are finite, thus coming to the realization of myself as a finite being. But this understanding of the other's finitude is precisely a lack of understanding. "I recognize that in the death of the other there is nothing recognizable. And this is how sharing—and finitude—can be inscribed…" (Nancy 1991, 33). When my understanding of the other's ownmost potentiality for being fails, I come to an understanding of *my* ownmost potentiality. Authentic understanding is thus a failure of definitive understanding, and is an understanding of this failure as such.[7] Here, I am authentic insofar as I understand that I cannot objectively understand myself. I come to this realization by first understanding the other in like fashion. I understand my relation to the other authentically only insofar as I recognize them as outstripping the bounds of my understanding. The paradox of authenticity is revealed: it is understanding that I do not understand. In other words, it is "the act of taking responsibility for an essential non-essence…" (Nancy 2008a, 3). Authenticity—Dasein's grasping of what is truly essential—is attained precisely at the moment it is lost.

Thus, we must come to realize that an authentic understanding of the other or oneself is never found once and for all. Dasein is never "'proper,' it's appropriating/inappropriating" (Nancy 2008b, 99). It is always in the process of reaching for an authentic understanding, never having arrived at it. Heidegger is not ignorant of this. He says as much, even in *Being and Time*: "We must first let the full enigmatical character of [Dasein] emerge, even if all we can do is to come to a genuine breakdown over its 'solution,' and to formulate anew the question about the Being of thrown projective Being-in-the-world" (*BT*, 188 G148). This enigma, this ongoing mysteriousness of Dasein, comes to the fore in the paradox of authenticity.[8]

In Heidegger's explication of the being-with of Dasein, one may argue that he reveals this insoluble and always ongoing mysteriousness only to cover it over in his arriving at an authentic being-with others. This authentic being-with others, leaping ahead, seems to culminate in the destining of a people in common, toward an end. "If fateful Dasein, as Being-in-the-world, exists essentially in Being-with Others, its historizing is a co-historizing and is determinative for it as *destiny* […] This is how we designate the historizing of the community, of a people" (*BT* 436 G384). Destining may be seen as an authentic communal self-understanding, a communal being-toward its own end. But this destining of a community—authentic being-with others— covers over the being-toward-death of each singular Dasein within it. For Heidegger, "the ultimate characteristic of the *with* […] will introduce the category of *the people* which will come to crystallize the possibility of *Dasein* to historize itself" (Nancy 2008a, 3). By insisting that authentic being-with others is ultimately the destining of a people, Heidegger closes Dasein off from its singular ownmost potentiality for being. This authentic being-with others leads to the relinquishing of a singular being-toward-death, what Nancy denotes as the sacrifice of a singular Dasein for the destiny of the community to which it belongs. "Sacrifice is the last word on the bringing together of singular Being-towards-death and Being-common-towards-destiny […] Consequently, the ownmost *taking care* of the other [that is, leaping ahead of them] consists in exposing or disposing [them] to this sacrifice" (11).

Authentic being-with others—leaping ahead of the other—thus fails to grasp the ultimate failure of authentic understanding. Dasein will always be singularly open—exposed, finite—and the sacrifice that Dasein makes for a community merely ignores this singularity. Conversely, an authentic understanding of Dasein, as Heidegger himself said, understands that it fails. It is an understanding that respects the openness of being-with others as being beyond a definitive

understanding. But Heidegger "erased the possibility he opened: namely, the possibility of thinking of the with exactly as he had indicated, as neither in exteriority, nor in interiority. Neither a herd, nor a subject. Neither anonymous, nor 'mine.' Neither improper nor proper" (Nancy 2008a, 11). The appropriation of oneself is never complete: the *with* of being-with is neither improper nor proper but always appropriating. Neither purely being-toward its ownmost death nor defined in its being-with others, Dasein is enigmatically a being-toward-one's-ownmost-death-with others. It is always open, at the dynamic point where it encounters the other. It is here—in the moment of being-with others that is also an exposure to its singular being-toward-death—where Dasein finds itself authentically as precisely always only approaching authenticity.

§2.2 – Authenticity Beyond Authenticity in the Digital World

How then, based on this Nancian critique of authenticity, should we understand ourselves authentically in digital experience? How should we come to understand digital technology as modulating this ongoing process of appropriation? Leaping ahead of the other using digital technology, although it may respect the unbounded nature of the human being, outstripping the screen, must be amended to avoid sacrificing the singular, finite human being for the communal.

First, we must acknowledge that, in a digital context, Heideggerian authenticity is paradoxical. In digital human experience, as with human experience generally, I am authentic insofar as I understand that I cannot be understood objectively. My profiles, posts, or comments—no matter how elaborate or fine-tuned they may be—can never present me in a way that can be truly definitively understood by another, from an objective point of view. Heidegger shows us that this enigma in ourselves must first be recognized in the other. To understand

myself authentically, as always beyond the boundaries of how I am presented in digital spaces, I must understand the other as such. When I interact with others online—scrolling through their profiles, commenting on their posts, reading and sharing what they've shared—I must realize that I do not definitively understand them, that they are not presented to me authentically, once and for all, on my digital interfaces. I do not, however, passively achieve this. When I am experiencing myself and others on the screen, "it can be hard to remember all that lies beyond it or even to acknowledge that everything is not captured by it" (Turkle 2011, 285). But although I may have to actively acknowledge the boundaries of my devices where the other and myself are concerned, only by doing so can I come to understand the paradoxical nature of authenticity. I reach for authenticity online only insofar as I understand the other and myself as beyond any possible understanding that digital technology can give me.

What Nancy will now emphasize is that even if I am able to recognize the other and myself as ultimately uncapturable within the bounds of my digital technology, I must never assume that I have arrived at an authentic understanding. That is, online as with anywhere else, I am never definitively authentic but always only approaching authenticity. Even online, Dasein "never stops *selving…*" (Nancy 2008b, 113). The paradox of Heideggerian authenticity reveals this always ongoing process of the appropriation of the online self. When I understand that the other and I always outstrip the bounds of our apps and websites, I understand that a definitive authentic self, either the other's or my own, is never achieved. Digital technologies can never define for us who we essentially are. They can only help us along our way to approaching an authentic self. As such, "we realize they are not perfect; they are, in object relations parlance, 'good enough.' Fortunately, disillusionment is what spurs growth": a continuous process of growth, toward authenticity but never arriving at it (Morris 2018, 84).

It is in light of this ongoing inconclusive nature of authenticity, emphasized by Nancy, that we must understand our being-with each other in the digital world as never directed toward a definitive goal—a Heideggerian destiny, toward which we would be heading by our use of digital technology to connect to and leap ahead of each other. That is, understanding ourselves as outstripping the bounds of the technology we use to connect with each other also implies that we outstrip the communal goals for using such technology altogether. We must make sure that in the process of being with each other online, we do not come to believe that we have sacrificed ourselves—as open finite beings—for the communities that we have created in the digital world. When we use digital technologies to connect with each other, coalescing around certain interests or ideologies in forums or with Twitter hashtags, we must always keep in mind that the finitude of our singular being is ultimately unassimilable into such a communal context. Here, the openness or mysteriousness of finite singular human being cannot be laid bare. Thus, recognizing the finitude of the other, I must avoid seeing only sameness when comparing myself with them in these digital settings.[9] "The like is not the same (*le semblable n'est pas le pareil*). I do not rediscover *myself*, nor do I recognize *myself* in the other: I experience the other's alterity, or I experience alterity in the other together with the alteration that 'in me' sets my singularity outside me and infinitely delimits it" (Nancy 1991, 33-4). Respecting the other and myself as always being beyond what is presented on the screen—as always being more than what our digital technology can present us with—I must also realize that we are always more than the communal goals of our using technology in the first place, always more than the connectivity and community—the sameness—that we achieve through digital means.

Tufekci, for instance, notes that over the past decade, sincere and earnest protest movements around the world have used digital technologies to connect, creating community.

"This is what the digitally networked public sphere can do in many instances: help people reveal their (otherwise private) preferences to one another and discover common ground" (Tufecki 2017, 26). For protest movements, this is invaluable: "Digital connectivity can help create, set, and maintain a mood in a protest, even if it is completely decentralized otherwise" (111). But Tufekci also notices that these movements seem to lose their dynamicity, their plasticity. "The initial tactic that brought people together is used again and again as a means of seeking the same life affirmation and returning to their only moment of true consensus: the initial moment when a slogan or demand or tactic brought them all out in the first place" (77). Digital technologies have afforded us the ability to make meaningful connections, to leap ahead of each other toward a common goal. But if they do not afford us the ability to constantly negotiate and reshape this goal—if the interactions online that constitute these authentic gatherings are not open to the finite singularity of their members that enables their reshaping—then they calcify into the simple, impotent repetition of a slogan or demand. Being-with one another must always be open to a re-evaluation of itself. It must not harden around a communal end to which the other and I are destined, forgetting our ownmost finitude and difference, our ownmost singular freedom.

Thus, we are only ever approaching authenticity with others, and digital technologies can only ever facilitate this process. "In the course of a life, we never 'graduate' from working on identity; we simply rework it with the materials at hand. From the start, online social worlds provided new materials" (Turkle 2011, 158). I have never arrived at my proper self online, nor can I. I am authentic therein only insofar as I understand us, the other and I, as always only approaching ourselves through our digital interactions. In this way, we may understand digital technology "as a transitional object: something we attach to as we take risks" (Morris 2018, 84). Digital technologies do not connect stable authentic selves—already determined beforehand,

having objectively definable ends and reasons for connecting online in the first place. Rather, they facilitate interactions with others that are constitutive of creating those ends—and those selves—in the first place. There is no stable authentic self online, only a self constantly in the process of coming to itself—of appropriating itself—through its use of digital technology to connect with others. Encountering the other online is therefore always a risk. It always entails that we do not know where we will end up and who we will become.

§2.3 – Touching: A Nancian Revisioning of Being-with Others

The Nancian critique of Heideggerian authenticity underlying our approach to an authentic self, calling for a change in how Dasein ought to understand itself and others, is indicative of a revisioning of being-with itself. We will therefore flesh out the ontological underpinnings of Nancy's treatment of being-with and the authentic self, arriving at his notion of touching, in order to more fully consider the ways in which digital technologies function as modulators of fundamental ontological structures.

To begin, we may understand Nancy's amendment to Heidegger's ontology as having to do with the intertwining of being-with and being-toward-death. In other words, for Nancy, the other and their finitude are intimately encountered in being-with. In *Being and Time,* Heidegger implies that singular finitude is not shared—that although the death of the other allows me to realize my own finitude, being-with others and being-toward-death are incommensurate—whereas Nancy emphasizes that, in being-with, the ownmost finitude of the other and myself arise together in being exposed to one another. "If it is true, as Heidegger says, that I cannot die in place of the other, then it is also true, and true in the same way, that the other dies insofar as the other is with me and that we are born and die to one another, exposing ourselves to one

another and, each time, exposing the inexposable singularity of the origin" (Nancy 2000, 89). For Nancy, it is precisely because I encounter the other that I am a finite being. He emphasizes that being-with and being-toward-death must not be seen as separable, incongruent elements of Dasein but rather as fundamentally interdependent: I am a singularly finite being only insofar as I am with others and I am with others only insofar as we are singularly finite beings.

This finitude with others is not the Heideggerian destining of a community. It is not the sacrifice of individual being-toward-death for a communal being-toward the end. For Nancy, "what is shared (death) is not a property of a subject that would be common to all and make us recognize each other as the same, but an opening or an exposure" (Morin 2012, 78). In this encounter with the other, fundamental to my very being, I am exposed to—opened up onto— what is my ownmost singular finitude by being exposed to others'. Exposure, not definitive understanding, happens here. In this moment, my ownmost singularity arises—is exposed—with the other's.[10] "A singular being *appears*, as finitude itself: at the end (or at the beginning), with the contact of the skin (or the heart) of another singular being, at the confines of the *same* singularity that is, as such, always *other*, always shared, always exposed" (Nancy 1991, 27-8).

This encounter with the other, this "contact," which is the arising of our ownmost finite existences, may be clarified as the other and I touching each other at our limits. "Nothing exists that is 'pure,' that does not come into *contact* with the other, […] touch alone exposes the limits at which identities or ipseities can *distinguish themselves* […] from one another, with one another, between one another, from among one another" (Nancy 2000, 156). Touching here is not meant as a merely physically sensorial event. It denotes the ontological way in which singular beings exist precisely against/amongst other beings, defined not solely from within themselves but just as much from without, at the limit—where they end and other beings begin—

revealing the way they are, in the same moment, differentiated from and interdependent—co-existing—with other beings. Socially, for human beings, touching represents the existentially constitutive encounter with the other. "'I' is a touch. 'I' is nothing other than the singularity of a touch…" (Nancy 2008b, 131). I am a singular being, an individual, only insofar as I am expressed at the limit of myself, touching the other. This encounter with the other is not "an experience that we have, *but an experience that makes us be*" (Nancy 1991, 26). It is in establishing this limit—touching the other—that I *am* as a finite being at all. In other words, I am my ownmost being (being-toward-death) insofar as I am being-with others. The limit I share with the other, at which we touch each other, establishes my very self.

The establishment of this limit is always in the process of being negotiated. Touching, between the other and myself, is dynamic. It is a continuous movement. Because of this, the authentic self "doesn't stop thinking itself, weighing itself…" (Nancy 2008b, 111). I am always coming to myself, as I am always negotiating my limit with the other. "Touching—immanence not attained but close, as though promised (no longer speech, nor gaze)—is the limit" (Nancy 1991, 39). I am authentically myself when I realize that I am constantly in the process of becoming authentic, touching the other. We do not grasp each other firmly or penetrate into one another. We simply brush up against each other. In other words, the other with whom I find myself at my limit is always incomprehensible, and so this limit itself is not definitively determined. Thus, touching is not determining but exposing, exposing the incomprehensibility of the other that exposes my own incomprehensibility and denies me the opportunity to definitively determine myself. For Nancy, this is all an encounter with another can be, yet it is the moment I come to myself and realize, in the unfinished fullness of an authentic self-understanding, who I am as a finite being, with others.

§2.4 – Touching Others Online: A Final Analysis of the Authentic Self in the Digital World

Now that we have revised the concept of being-with, conceptualizing it as touching, how should we understand its modulation through digital technology? I must understand that I am not simply with others in digital experience after the fact of my arising as a singular being, I am fundamentally constituted as such, in the first place, by the very encounter with the other that I experience through my digital interfaces. This being-with others is not a definitive act but an ongoing negotiation with the other—a touching of oneself and another.

Nancy himself refers to touching as occurring in technological contexts. In 1992, he writes about the physical page—the book—as a touching through technological means:

> [We] are touching each other upon this page, or more precisely, the page itself is a touching (of my hand while it writes, and your hands while they hold the book). This touch is infinitely indirect, deferred—machines, vehicles, photocopies, eyes, still other hands are all interposed—but it continues as a slight, resistant fine texture, the infinitesimal dust of a contact, everywhere interrupted and pursued. In the end, here and now, your own gaze touches the same traces of characters as mine, and you read me, and I write you. (Nancy 2008b, 51-3)

This may easily be adapted for digital technologies. When we scroll through our social media, when we read and write emails and texts, when we post on pages and forums, this is all a touching, "of my hand while it [types], and your hands while they hold the [screen]. [...] Here and now, your own gaze touches the same traces of characters as mine, and you [scroll through] me, and I [type] you" (51-3). What this means for our understanding of digital experience is that any use of digital technology to interact with others is an act of touching the other, by virtue of touching being a fundamental element of the structure of the human being. Touching is

ubiquitous within experience, including digital experience. "Existence is *with*: otherwise nothing

exists" (Nancy 2000, 4). So, every keystroke, every glance at the screen, every moment of

existence in the digital world is a touch modulated by digital technology. Whenever I bring my

attention to my digital interfaces and interact with others on my devices, I am finding myself up

against the limits of myself with others, in touch with others.

This touching online is not, of course, a physical contact. It is rather the ontological event

of my existence. When I post on my profiles, comment on others', exchange emails or text

messages, I am creating a digital space in which I arise precisely by juxtaposing myself with

others—that is, by differentiating between others and myself. This difference is what makes

space for me in a digital context. "It is important to see that if touching is the primary structure of

sensing or existing, this structure is not one of proximity or simultaneity of the touching and the

touched, but that of differance as the 'origin' of space-time" (Morin 2012, 42). On my interfaces,

a space—not physical or objectively measurable—opens up in which I come to exist as a

singular being, standing out against/amongst others as different from them. This is digital space.

It must then be emphasized that touching in digital space indicates the very arising of the

other and myself altogether, as separate finite singularities. For Nancy, "finitude is not a

limitation imposed on a being by the fact that there happen to be other things outside of it and

which press upon it. Rather, finitude consists in the fact that any being must be exposed to an

outside in order to exist or be what it is…" (Morin 2012, 31). Thus, when my experience is

mediated through digital technology, I arise as a finite being fundamentally by my being in touch

with others through it. I *am*, in the moment my attention falls upon my device, insofar as I am in

contact with others, differentiated from them in the digital world, which offers me a new

modulation of touching. On the screen, we are ourselves—we are becoming ourselves—

precisely through our actions therein. We post ourselves, read ourselves, comment ourselves. This is the creation of ourselves, ex nihilo, from the space created between the other and me, as we touch each other through digital means.

Thus, Nancy's concept of touching indicates that digital space is, ontologically, not somehow derivative of physical space. Through touching, the screen, "that square I [look] at from above, so small yet so vast, [is transformed] into a crossroads of attention and visibility, both interpersonal and interactive…" (Tufekci 2017, xxv). Digital space is, in the full Nancian sense of "space," an opening in which we are exposed to each other, in which we come to exist "in the paradoxical simultaneity of togetherness (anonymous, confused, and indeed massive) and disseminated singularity…" (Nancy 2000, 7).

Likewise, digital experience is not the "virtual" image of "real" experience. What we are doing online is not merely representing ourselves to others. "The internet is not a separate, virtual world, but it is also not a mere replica of the offline one that is just a little faster and bigger" (Tufecki 2017, 131). Digital experience is experience in its fullest sense: we ourselves exist online with one another. My profiles, posts, or tweets are not merely representations of myself, but constitutive moments—wherein I come into contact with others, touching them and negotiating our limits together, and thus arise as a finite singular being.

Tufekci gives evidence of this ontological reality of touching in digital experience when she describes the psychological effects of aiding protest movements using social media from a physical distance, organizing supplies and donations and collecting documentation of police and state violence: "This kind of technologically mediated interaction via screens located far from the physical scenes of the clashed does not imply psychological distance. Many who do this type of work report suffering genuine trauma, because the online world is not unreal or virtual. The

picture, the voice, or the tweet belongs to a real person" (Tufekci 2017, 58). Even though I may be geographically removed from a situation, digital technology gives me the capability to touch others who are physically there. A "there" is opened up for me, corresponding and coextensive with the physical place, in which I find myself with them, in a real sense, through my touching them using digital technology. I am in turn affected by events that happen there in a real way. As such, touching, by its digital modulation, indicates that the "virtual" is just as real as the "real."

This ontological similarity between physical and digital spaces opened up by touching should not, however, lead to our seeing the digital world as a place for the creation of a stable, delineated self. The space created by my touching the other "has neither a consistency nor continuity of its own" (Nancy 2000, 5). The limits between the other and myself are not defined but constantly in the process of being negotiated and determined. It is this process itself that is the other's and my co-existence. Thus, insofar as touching is a ubiquitous aspect of human experience, any space it opens up—physical, digital, or otherwise—is amorphous, not delineated or set down in an absolutely definitive manner. This is a space not for a stable self but for a self constantly in the process of coming to itself with others.

What we may then emphasize is that there is no stable self, defined beforehand in a more "real," physical space, that comes to use digital technologies. In a digital context, it is through the very use of these technologies to mediate an encounter with the other—a touching that negotiates our limits—that the self arises at all. Morris (2018) says that "we can use technology as a bridge not a surrogate for…" encountering the other, but this metaphor is mistaken (15). There are no two stable sides to this mediation, as though the other and I were already defined in the "real" world before coming together and interacting on our devices. As a touching, interacting with each other online is a constitutive act of our very being selves to begin with.

Digital technologies do not therefore enable us to merely represent or project a definitive self out toward each other. As facilitating a moment of touching, they provide a space for the very arising of *us*, you and I, altogether. This space "does not lead from [me] to the other; it constitutes no connective tissue, no cement, no bridge" (Nancy 2000, 5). Rather, it is the site of the other and me arising as singular finite beings altogether.

> Turkle takes note of this fact when addressing our frustrations with digital technology: One says, "I don't have enough time alone with my mind." Others say, "I have to struggle to make time to think." "I artificially make time to think." "I block out time to think." These formulations all depend on an "I" imagined as separate from the technology, a self that is able to put the technology aside so that it can function independently of its demands. This formulation contrasts with a growing reality of lives lived in the continuous presence of screens. (Turkle 2011, 167)

She laments that this is the case, that digital experience as such does not afford us the space to create stable selves. What Nancy shows, however, is that this is an ontological characteristic of all spaces. It is an attribute of all human experience: "I" am never completed and finished before coming into contact with others. Thus, we do not lose stability when mediating our experiences with digital technology. We have simply exposed the fact that we were never definitively "I"— "me," "you"—to begin with, and that we are always in the process of becoming who we are.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

We must note, as before, that digital technologies have a range of functions, affording us different ways of understanding how we are with each other. "Digital tools are not uniform. Rather, they have a range of design affordances that facilitate different paths…" (Tufekci 2017, 55). They can encourage different understandings of the interactions with others that are had

through them. Algorithmically, the other and I can be assumed to be normal consumers of information, leveled down to averageness. But the space provided by digital technology in which to encounter the other can also be designed to reveal ourselves as finite, indeterminate beings. These affordances are built into our digital technology by design. We can deliberately choose how they enable our understanding of our being-with others in the world.

In light of our Nancian critique of digital being-with, can we design digital technologies to facilitate a perfect authentic understanding of the other and ourselves? The answer, ultimately, is no. With respect to touching, any authentic understanding of the other or myself is incomplete, and so, any attempt through digital technology to arrive at such an authentic understanding will be incomplete. We are always in the process of touching each other, and of coming to a proper understanding of ourselves and each other. But any designing of digital technology, the creation of a digital format by which to encounter the other, always presupposes a certain definitive way of understanding this encounter. It cannot offer "a flat, open space with no barriers and no structures" (Tufekci 2017, 162). Whether more or less a leaping in or a leaping ahead, digital technology, as technology, will always lay out boundaries. The screen will always have edges.

It is therefore up to us to note the failure of digital technology to enable a definitive authentic understanding of how we touch others in digital experience. Not in order to condemn and abandon such technology for a sort of primitive utopia without it—such a situation, if realized, would also fail to make room for stable selves—but rather, to respect the fact that every encounter with the other, through digital technology or by any other means, is always an appropriating—a drawing nearer to an authentic self—that is never finished. We, the other and I, are always at work with each other finding our limits, online or otherwise. We must therefore ask how we can design our digital devices and programs in such a way that exposes, from the outset,

their boundaries and limitations. How can we design digital technologies in such a way that respects the fact that they are—as mediators of touching—ultimately unable to present us with a perfect understanding of the other, and therefore of ourselves, experienced through them?

Conclusion: The Search for an Authentic Self Online—Further Lines of Inquiry

Through this paper, we have made our way from Heidegger's ontology of being-with and his envisioning of an authentic self to Nancy's critique of Heideggerian authenticity and his revisioning of being-with as touching. We built this ontological framework in order to apply it specifically to the experience of using digital technology to connect with others and understand ourselves. Drawing additionally on the psychological and sociological work of Turkle, Morris, and Tufekci, we have come to understand digital technology not as creating outright a world in which we are authentic or inauthentic, but as modulating a fundamental, ontological structure that precludes either as definitive states of being. Ultimately, in light of Nancy's ontology of touching and its modulation in digital experience, authenticity—as a definitive authentic self-understanding—was shown to be impossible. We are never authentic online, once and for all. We, the other and I, are always open, outstripping the bounds of what our digital interfaces can contain. But the impossible is always a possibility: we are always reaching for an authentic understanding of ourselves, always searching for our limits, always touching each other.

Therefore, when designing and interacting with digital technologies, we must be prescient of the myriad ways in which they can afford and encourage certain understandings of ourselves, restricting or enabling an awareness of and respect for our finitude beyond the screen. We must come to understand our use of digital technologies as a mode, among many, of touching the other in the always ongoing process of determining who we are alongside them.

Finally, we may note two further lines of inquiry, exposing the limits of this paper itself. First, pertaining to our general ontological discussion, we may ask in what ways Heidegger has already anticipated our Nancian critique of leaping ahead toward a definitive authentic being-with. To what extent has he already acknowledged the always unfinished nature of authenticity? In his own reflection on *Being and Time*, Heidegger seems to insist that the openness of Dasein, its mysteriousness, is of central concern. "'Being and Time' means not a book but the task that is given. The authentic task given here is what we do not know; and insofar as we know this *genuinely*—namely *as* a given task—we always know it only in *questioning*. Being able to question means being able to wait, even for a lifetime" (Heidegger 2000, 220-1).

Second, pertaining to our discussion of digital technologies, we may ask how they differ from past technologies. Surely, they introduce something new into human experience. Is this just a difference in quantity, of the information presented to us or of the opportunities available to us for engaging with others? Or is there something truly qualitatively novel here? Perhaps—from our ontological perspective, with the indeterminate finitude of the human being in mind—what we may note is that we are always exposed and opened onto our future as radically novel. As such, whatever novelty there is in digital technology, it is, in an ontological sense, nothing new.

Regardless of the answers, we may still note that in our use of digital technologies to modulate our experience of others, there is always the possibility of understanding that touching happens here. There is always the opportunity to realize that we overflow the edges of our screens.[11] "Que nous le voulions ou non, des corps se touchent sur cette page…" (Nancy 2008b, 51): Whether we like it or not, bodies are touching each other on this page... on webpages, social media profiles, or forum threads, just as much as on the pages of this paper itself.

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[1] Throughout this paper, the word "screen" denotes not merely the visual interfaces of our digital technologies, but any interface that allows us to access the digital world (e.g., keyboards, braille displays, haptics interfaces—even, unintuitively, headphones or microphones). This misleading usage is excused here on the grounds of its metaphorical resonance, which—it must be acknowledged—is already a consequence of the ways in which the worlds we share give precedence to visual experience.

[2] This paper will not, therefore, attempt to critique any specific devices or online platforms, whose designs are contingent and subject to change. Rather, its goal is to assemble a fundamental ontological toolkit with which such an immanent critique could be carried out.

[3] Another resource for analyzing technology would be Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology," where technology is a way of understanding beings as merely being available for use, while also covering over this reduction of beings. Here, the human being becomes exactly what it makes of everything else: a use object, and is alienated from itself. "Precisely nowhere does man today any longer encounter himself, i.e., his essence. […] [He] fails in every way to hear in what respect he ek-sists, from out of his essence…" (Heidegger 1977, 27).

[4] All quotations of Heidegger's *Being and Time* will be cited with the abbreviated form: (*BT*, [page number in the English translation] G[page number in the original German text]).

[5] Authenticity is not a morally charged concept for Heidegger. It does "not imply a moral-existentiell or an 'anthropological' distinction but rather a relation which […] [is] an 'ecstatic' relation of the essence of man to the truth of Being" (Heidegger 1993, 236). Here, authenticity simply denotes an ontological characteristic of a mode of Dasein in which it understands the being of the beings it takes care of.

[6] There is an interesting point to be made about one's time when in the mode of being-with in the They. The They dictates to me my experience of time itself. The busyness that Heidegger describes as an attribute of being a theyself is not a matter of not having enough seconds, minutes, hours in the day. It is the very dividing of one's time into those measurable units, objective units given over to the care of others.

[7] We may hear echoes of Kierkegaard in Heidegger's thought: "Understanding and to understand are two things…" (Kierkegaard 2014, 171).

[8] This may be seen as the result of the fundamental being-with of Dasein. An authentic self-understanding comes to what in me is my ownmost potentiality for being—my finitude—which is completely non-relational. But I am fundamentally relational, related to the other, and it is this very relation—in which I realize the other as finite—that opens me up to and exposes me to my own non-relational finitude. The paradox of authenticity shows that Dasein is both, fundamentally, relational and non-relational—both a being-with others and a being-toward-death, and that these seemingly incongruent moments of Dasein are themselves essentially intertwined.

[9] In contrast, Turkle emphasizes the sameness of authenticity: "authenticity […] follows from the ability to put oneself in the place of another, to relate to the other because of a shared store of human experiences: we are born, have families, and know loss and the reality of death" (Turkle 2011, 6). Here, what I share with the other is what is the same between us. But we are also always radically different, and the openness of this difference means that any understanding of ourselves is never complete, never authentic but approaching authenticity.

[10] When I encounter the other, we do not simply share what is the same between us, but also—and always—what is different. I am exposed to the other as radically different from me. This

difference, between ownmost singular finitudes, cannot be expunged. The other and I are always both the same and different. The same because we are different and different because we are the same. Here, we may compare Nancy's thought to Derrida's, and acknowledge his proximity to Derrida's concept of *différance*. We may also note Heidegger's later thought broaching the topic of sameness and difference: "The same, by contrast, is the belonging together of what differs, through a gathering by way of the difference" (Heidegger 1971, 216).

[11] In describing the inherent danger of technology—the way technology conceals from us what is outside of its bounds, the way it enframes our experience—Heidegger says: "The saving power is not secondary to the danger. The selfsame danger is, when it is *as* the danger, the saving power" (Heidegger 1977, 42). That is, there is always the possibility in our use of technology that it is revealed as concealing whatever is beyond its bounds.

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