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Abstract

How has the diffusion of online communities changed how their users construct, view, and define their identity? In this paper, we choose to approach this issue by considering two particular philosophical problems related to personal identity: 1) The Characterization Question, namely "which actions, experiences, beliefs, values, desires, character traits, and so on can we attribute to a given person?" 2) "How do self-other relations affect the ethical implication of identity construction?" To address them, we adopt a comprehensive framework composed of cognitive niches and cognitive niche construction theories, and we discuss different philosophical and technological notions. In particular: the Filter Bubble problem, the concept of affordances, and the Sartrean idea of Bad Faith.

Keywords: Identity; Online Communities; Filter Bubble; Bad Faith; Affordance; Virtual Identity.

Introduction

How has the diffusion of online communities[1] changed how their users construct, view, and define their identity? This question arises from two intuitive assumptions amply accepted by the philosophical community: one's personal identity is contextually framed, and Online Communities are a new context to which personal identity is adjusting (Ess, 2012). In particular, we argue that the philosophical literature should consider two specific topics to comprehend the broad changes that online sociality brought on our philosophical quest to understand personal identity.

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[1]We will make use of the phrase "online communities" to refer to different kinds of online platforms, as social networking sites, newsgroups, forums, blogs, and miniblogs. We adopt this formula because it has the merit of highlighting the social and communal aspect that defines the phenomena we are taking into consideration. At the same time, this expression is specific enough that cannot be mistaken as a reference to online media, newspapers online, and more generic platforms.

1. Who am I? Or the characterization question.

In the philosophical literature, the characterization question (Schechtman, 1996) brings forward a description of identity as contingent and temporary since it refers to those characteristics that one occasionally takes to define herself as a person or to distinguish herself from others (Olson, 2019). On the one hand, on Online Communities, those characteristics can be consciously recalibrated by the users (by creating their profile, by choosing to associate their profile to some others, by liking some pages, by sharing particular contents, and so on). On the other hand, those characteristics, elaborated by filtering algorithms, set what the users can access or not, limiting their freedom to adjust and change their identity online (this brief description summarizes the Filter Bubble problem presented by Pariser (2011) that we will tackle later on). Thus, within Online Communities, the Characterization Question would entail different implications than within the offline world.

2. How do self-other relations affect identity construction?

We can easily connect identity construction to self-other relations (Breakwell, 1993). The philosophical and social sciences literature usually depicts social representations and social identities intimately close (Breakwell, 1993) since it defines the process of identity construction as the incorporation of how agents describe themselves and how others recognize them. In this view, social representations give occasion to the agents to adopt various possible identities to position themselves in a variety of ways and orient themselves in their social world. In turn, by relating self-other relationships to issues of identity, also the problem of responsibility arises: only *I* can be responsible for *my* actions, and that means that how *I* define *myself* is relevant when discussing what for I consider myself accountable Olson (2019, p. 4). Responsibility, in an-

other turn, comes with the burden of freedom. In all debates about accountability, one given assumption is that people can be responsible only for those actions they freely commit. In the framework of Online Communities, freedom of choice is a complex notion: in part because of the already mentioned filter algorithms, and, in part, because of the concept of Bad Faith (Sartre, 2018) entails. The idea of Bad Faith indicates a state of self-deception regarding one's freedom of choice and one's identity (which also affects one's sense of responsibility). Thus, the analysis of the implications that the notion of bad faith entails in online communities can shed some light on how self-other relations affect identity construction there.

To address these problems, we are going to adopt a comprehensive framework and some relevant philosophical notions. The broad framework that, we argue, could best set our analysis is the theory on cognitive niches, adjusted to cover also the specifics of Online Communities by Arfini et al. (2017). We will present in detail this approach in the next section. In the third section, we will specify some philosophical notions that could direct our analysis. Specifically, we will discuss the already mentioned Filter Bubble problem (Pariser, 2011), the idea of Affordances (Gibson, 1977), and a simplified version of the Sartrean concept of Bad Faith (Sartre, 2018). To make the matter more pragmatically oriented, we will use these concepts and discussions to give reasons for some phenomena – as catfishing and self-harm communities – that challenge our views on the boundaries between online/offline identity.

A Cognitive and Ecological Approach to Online Communities

The notion of "cognitive niche," discussed by various authors in the last fifty years, claims that the uniqueness of Homo Sapiens' development rests on its ability to exploit the environment in an epistemically relevant way (Bertolotti & Magnani, 2017). In particular, the notion of cognitive niche takes into consideration the social dimension of the agents, as it explains their cognitive involvement in terms of the continuous sharing of information.

Cognitive niches are also an efficient tool to explain the relation between users and the online world. Arfini et al. (2017, p. 2) proposed to call the specific type of niches that emerges in these frameworks "virtual cognitive niches" and defined them as "digitally-encoded collaborative distributions of diverse types of information into an environment performed by agents to aid thinking and reasoning about some target domain." The authors start from the assumption that, when entering the web, users face a different type of ecology, and, by just accessing it, they modify it. This phenomenon is widely accepted and studied within HCI, cognitive science, ethnomethodology, symbolic interactionism, cognitive ethnography, and social phenomenology. Indeed, to enter virtual cognitive niches, people need to use different input devices, such as mouse and keyboard or a smartphone touchscreen, plus online tools, such as search engines, social net-

work platforms, news media, and so on. These devices may present our online experience as a mere exploration without consequences for the virtual environment: we can have the illusion of seeing without being seen, search without leaving a trace. Unfortunately, this is an illusion, since every step online leaves a mark and affects the virtual environment (if not for others, for ourselves) (Pariser, 2011).

Even if virtual cognitive niches can emerge in various forms, Arfini et al. (2017) take into consideration one particular type of them: online communities. Social networks are taken as the more fascinating forms of virtual cognitive niches, considering their global reach and high level of social exploitability. They also are considered highly valuable in philosophy and communication studies for their epistemic merit since, in those platforms, there is a continuous exchange of information between users regarding both the online world (which Arfini et al. (2017) calls the virtual domain) and the offline world (called the external domain). The virtual domain is the combination of users' avatars or profiles, nicknames, objects, posts, shared contents, and the way the filtering algorithms present the platform to each user and present the user to others. The actual external domain includes the real persons, their surrounding material environment, and the larger, extra-personal world. The meaning of this separation is that the contents that slip into the virtual domain, usually belong, or refer, to the external domain (Arfini et al., 2017).

Another essential feature to consider to differentiate the virtual and the external domain is the fact that, in the external domain, bodily functions and abilities guide our experience (through physical perception, psychological state, conceptual background, and so on). On the contrary, the structure of the platforms we use and its features guide our virtual domain experience. Moreover: every post and every content we have access to in the virtual domain is filtered by various algorithms to give us a unique experience in that framework (based on our interests, opinions, past preferences, and so on). This filtering system is a distinctive character of online communities. Thus, our experience is not primarily unique because of our physical, psychological, or experiential dispositions, but because some predictive frames embedded into the virtual cognitive niche establish our access to some information and not others. Consciously acknowledging this difference between external and virtual domains is not easy. The predictive algorithms work as invisible adjustments to the platform's interface in ways that make the users' experience more enjoyable and familiar. The connection between virtual and external domains depends on the same mechanism: the agents see contents that refer or belong to the external domain as much as the virtual system predisposes it to make their experience pleasant. The users' profile is then a mix between what the users want to show and what the platform influenced others to see about their contents.

Eli Pariser, adopting a strong view on how the users present themselves, claims that the agents implicitly aim at hiding every detail they do not want to show and at highlighting what

they like more about themselves and their interests (Pariser, 2011). Thus, the virtual identity resembles more a performance, directed by a sum of algorithmic patterns and personalized interfaces. This outcome generates what Pariser calls the Filter Bubble. Social networks rely on algorithms and prediction engines to extrapolate the user's identity and its choices. Once the site has collected enough information, it can propose on the agents' feed those contents which they would most prefer, in part neglecting news that they might not find entertaining or of interest (Pariser, 2011). When the individuals enter the virtual cognitive niche and exploit it for its benefits, they have no way to establish (or decide) what specific contents are hidden from their view, or why a particular content is displayed.

In other terms, filter algorithms and the online platform organize and orient the sets of *affordances* a person can find online. Psychologist James J. Gibson (1977) has described affordances as opportunities for action that can be picked up just by direct perception. So far, the algorithm-based personalization of the virtual cognitive niches and the emerging affordances in online environments, have been discussed as potentially dangerous for epistemological reasons (Arfini et al., 2018). In this paper, we would like to adopt a different approach and explain what consequences the cognitive structure of online communities has on the construction and establishment of one's identity, addressing the two questions presented in the introduction. Thus, in the next section, we will illustrate two problematic issues that affect the user construction of identity in virtual cognitive niches.

Identity Issues in Online Communities

Online communities, considered as "virtual cognitive niches", then represent three kinds of utilities: an epistemically and cognitively rich framework, a socially fertile environment, and a platform where agents can present themselves as members in the online community of their choosing. Of course, offline and online worlds are drastically different in terms of the availability of epistemic resources, the modality of self-presentation and self-profiling, and self-other interactions; moreover, the online world profoundly affects the community members' offline dimension. Thus, in this section, we will discuss which consequences the filter bubble and the platform interface of online communities have on the identity construction of the agents.

The Attachment Theory

When one fills in a profile to get access to an online community, it is probably the first time they have done something like that. An online community profile imposes limitations on how agents can fill it – as much as a form does (often there is a limited word-count, open or close questions to address, and so on) but the center of a profile is what the agent is interested in, what they care to divulge of themselves, and what potential new interests they could grow. First and foremost, entering data in an online community means to get a specific audience for them, which can be represented by people you

know from the outside world, but also people who have the same interests as you have, follow the same programs, are concerned with the same issues.

With this reflection in mind, we can agree with Rodogno (2012), who argued that online communities could favor the growth of a specific type of identity construction, which follows from his Attachment Theory: the sense of self relates to what we care about, which shape our affective life and normative view of the world. More than that, we maintain that online communities display particular affordances that support the view of not just oneself's identity, but also others', creating an *extended* framework of one's community, consistent through attachments. Extended, in this context, relates to the extended mind theory and follows the description of cognitive niches construction provided by Clark (2008, p. 62) "defined as the process by which animals build physical structures that transform problem spaces in ways that aid (or sometimes impede) thinking and reasoning about some target domain or domains." In this case, the domain that is targeted by the construction of these cognitive niches is one's and others' attachments and, transitively, people's identities. Of course, the "targeted" domain here presents some convoluted implications. Indeed, if the target domain is the set of attachments that a particular person has (Rodogno, 2012) there are two considerations and a question to put forward.

First: The initial cognitive niches that allow and foster the agents' identity construction are, of course, offline and define, since birth, not only their cognitive and epistemological abilities and processes but also how they construct and express their identity. So, the online environment is not the first cognitive niche in which the agents dwell and some experiences are incredibly different in online communities: in few other frameworks, for example, people have a profile that they can compile with all their interests, all their social connections, and that they can make accessible by choice to anyone or selected few. It is a unique place in which they could become aware of their interests and attachment (through time) in a way that is not available in the offline world, and that does not reflect only their offline self but also what they appreciate in the online domain. Moreover, they may become more attached to some persons, values, interests, and objects, and see the online dimension as a way to cultivate them. With this closure, another reflection arises.

The second consideration, which follows from the first, is that people can express their identity here in many forms: users can add features and details on their profile; they can upload and share external contents; they can like, share, and comment contents found in their feeds through the connection with other users. These are all possible affordances that users of online communities can adopt and that reflect their identity in these frameworks; better, the one they can *only* choose in these frameworks (Nagy & Neff, 2015). For example, the possibility to *like* a set of contents published by another person with just a click and potentially no further interaction with the person who uploaded or shared it is a pos-

sibility that is solely offered by online environments. At the same time, since the identity online can be express with these many forms that are exclusive of online communities, the way an agent appears to oneself and others online is going to be perceived and afforded differently in comparison to the offline environments. This consideration, which highlights the different modality of expression, display, and self-reflection in online and offline domains, gives reason to see the user as at least dual in appearance. This consideration, in turn, opens another point of discussion.

Indeed, now we should ask a question that has appeared repeatedly in Internet Studies in the last decade: is there a rupture or fragmentation of identities in the offline/online divide? Could I be a *different me* online? After the above two considerations, it would be easy to answer positively to these questions. The positive answer, though, would oversimplify the role of online communities in the lives of users and ignore an important fact about them: there are three ways users become visible as individuals on platforms.

1. A *personal profile*, which belongs to a offline person.

2. An *avatar*: a profile with all the features of a personal one, but with what clearly appears as a made-up name.

3. A *fake personal profile*, which appears as belonging to an offline person, but the name is made-up or it belongs to another person, and the user expresses made-up interests, personal connections, and so on.

The personal profile is a tool for identification online: it allows people to extend their social connections, interests, and values in the online dimension. In this case, it is intuitive to consider online identities as an integration of the offline ones. Since online communities offer different affordances to convey and reflect on people's attachments, they can even favor a more comprehensive view of their identities.

The avatar situation may be more complex to evaluate: usually, avatars are profiles that exploit and convey a particular interest of the people who create them. They may expand the referential community of the users, while not directly mention their offline identity. It is a way to explore one's attachment without the boundaries of online personal recognition. In a way, it favors, even more, the self-reflection of the user without conducting them to be identified by others. Moreover, the feedback with the online dimension may also create communities of likeminded individuals. These associations may not even correspond to the ones with which one person without the avatar's anonymity protection usually associate oneself. So, the self of the users appears even more expressed, and extended in these environments in comparison to the offline dimension.

Situations of *catfishing* may represent a different case. Literature in Internet studies usually defines the phenomenon of catfishing as a deceptive activity or the creation of a fake online profile for deceptive purposes (Smith et al., 2017). Fake profiles represent extraordinary instances of how online communities may foster a reshape of selfhood for their users. Ideally, to pretend to be other persons, catfishing individuals need to create a system of online attachments that have little to no connections to their real identity. In reality, as reported by various studies (Smith et al., 2017; Lamphere & Lucas, 2019), they display more common features to the persons they actually are, than what they intend. For example, let us consider the situations in which catfishing profiles involved coaches that pretended to be friends and companions of players to motivate them to play better. In these cases, the hidden motivation for these deceivers is what moves both their online relationships and their offline life. In this sense, we find a link between catfishing profiles and avatars: they are both created to explore, extend, and exploit an attachment of people that they could not easily explore in the offline dimension (Lamphere & Lucas, 2019). Of course, there is a hardcore difference between these situations that we need to mention. The ethical problems that relate to catfishing examples do not apply to the avatar cases. Nevertheless, this difference does not entail a difference concerning identity issues. Since there is continuous feedback between online and offline reality, and the agents can explore and extend one's attachment, the characterization of one's identity in both cases is only exalted and extended.

Considering Bad Faith in Online Communities

This section should begin with the topic neglected in the previous one: ethical implications. Indeed, if ethics does not matter when referring to identity as a way to answer the Characterization question, it is highly relevant when considering self-other relations. Indeed, the philosophical and social sciences literature usually depicts social representations and social identities intimately close (Breakwell, 1993), and it defines the process of identity construction as the incorporation of how agents describe themselves and how others recognize them. Of course, other links that tie identity to self-others relationships are freedom and responsibility: if I act on my own free will, I can be accounted for and held responsible for that action. We precisely need to address the topic of Bad Faith in this context for the strong link between social representation, social identity, and responsibility. Bad Faith is a notion that Sartre puts forward not when dealing with identity problems, but with freedom and self-other relations. Around this concept, there is a broad debate in the philosophical community: there is no clear consensus on what exactly Sartre meant when referring to Bad Faith and in which sense we need to take the examples he put forward for it (Magnani, 2007; Tartaglia, 2012; Flynn, 2013). In this particular context in which we are discussing identity and responsibility, so in the framework of online communities as virtual cognitive niches, we may put ourselves at ease by highlighting some aspects of Bad Faith that are recognized by all scholars, and that pertain to the themes we are analyzing.

First, we can describe Bad Faith as the self-delusional belief that some people have when they think they do not have

full control of their choices and behaviors (and so, their identity) (Tartaglia, 2012). Since they believe they have no control over their choices, behaviors, and so on, agents only accept partial descriptions of their identities while relegating other parts to "roles" that they feel obliged to play. Second, Bad Faith implies a problematic relationship between agents and other people (Webber, 2011), since it arises when agents want to avoid deeply troubling feelings as shame and anxiety that derive from both the confrontation and connection to others. Third, notwithstanding the derivative nature of the Bad Faith condition to self-others relationships, it is described first and foremost not as a deception of others, but a self-deceiving state (Flynn, 2013). The agents do not intend to trick others in thinking something wrong about them. Indeed, they delude themselves in playing a particular role, and, as an implication, they deceive others. They may trick others, but they are even more deluded. Forth, the self-deceiving aspect of Bad Faith has an impact on the sense of responsibility they have for their actions (Magnani, 2007; Webber, 2011). If they consider some roles as externally or contextually imposed on themselves, they do not experience their freedom in playing them, so they believe they cannot be held responsible for them. The loss of responsibility is just felt in their first-person perspective, though: they remain accountable for their actions, choices, and behaviors, but the self-deception does not make them acknowledge it.

We can easily connect this subject with some topics we investigated so far. The first and most obvious is the fact that in comparison to the offline world, online communities provide an environment in which people can hide some data about themselves and highlighting others with ease. In a way, agents may even have the perception of having more control over their image online. Of course, this is an easily breakable illusion, since privacy issues, filtering algorithms, and cyberbullying are phenomena quite known. Still, the impression counts: if people feel more in control, they also feel they have more freedom. Hence it gives them the means to embrace the identity expressed online without issues. This would also imply that a sense of responsibility needs to be associated with online identities, so warding off the possibility of being in Bad Faith in an online community.

However, the last consideration may be too hasty: after all, online profiles are selective, and the selection of information people share about themselves depends more or less on three factors: what the online communities allow them to share, what they do want to share, and what slips out from their experience online and their contacts. They can actually improve the way Bad Faith works for them, making them express a part of their identity and not others minimizing their anxiety and shame. Rodogno provides an example:

> Consider this case. After a long day at work, our repairman, Sam, goes home. He thinks that dating Websites may help him find a stable companion. [. . .] As he does so, he is asked to fill in the usual obligatory fields: name, sex, age, sexual preference, profession, and marital sta-

tus. Sam is quite annoyed at his having to fill out one of these entries, namely, the one stating his current profession. [. . .] In fact, he believes that this kind of information is simply misleading in this context; it would convey the wrong kind of ideas about him. Sam has worked as a repairman only for the last few weeks and sees this occupation only as a temporary way to pay the bills. Sam is a violinist: being first violin in a symphonic orchestra is what he cares about (Rodogno, 2012, p. 312).

This quote feels quite similar to the examples of the waitress and the coquette that Sartre brought about when discussing Bad Faith. Sartre discusses how they, too, recognize a part of their identity as more important than the others, and they adjusted their behavior at the cost of living a half-chosen life by being in Bad Faith. Of course, though, we need to highlight an essential difference between Sartre's cases and Rodogno's one: we know that Sam puts effort and responsibility into his work. Sam does not feel ashamed nor anxious about his work as a repairman. He prefers to share that he is a violinist in online communities because, as argued before, they revolve around attachments, which are highly subjective and may change in time and context. Looking up at this scene, we cannot see any sign of the loss of responsibility that the Bad Faith brings, nor the case suggests that Sam feels obliged to work as a repairman. He sees working as a repairman as a temporary way to pay the bills: this is not enough to label him as in Bad Faith.

As we can see, if we discuss the topic of Bad Faith in online communities, it appears even more troublesome than if analyzed for offline situations. The only circumstances so far discussed in which the extension of people's identity in online communities brings detrimental effects on their moral behavior is the catfishing example. Nevertheless, does that example count as Bad Faith? People who create a fake personal account do not usually deny the control or freedom they feel about their identity. They do not begin catfishing to lessen their anguish, anxiety, nor shame, but for curiosity, or personal gain, or to experiment with different perspectives. They do not even lose a sense of responsibility regarding their offline identity since they feel responsible for the identity's attachment they made up. Thus, it is true that catfishing is a problematic ethical condition for the agents, which involves an apparent rupture in their identity. Still, we cannot label it as an example of Bad Faith.

We can make a different case for a phenomenon that emerged in recent years and attracted attention from both the academic community and the mass media: the self-harm online communities. These communities, which promote various kinds of self-harming habits (anorexia (Norris et al., 2006), bulimia (Borzekowski et al., 2003), self-cutting (Zinoviev et al., 2016), etc.) are of high interest when discussing matters of identity due to their (alleged) premises and the reasons why they have members. The (alleged) premises of these communities is to grant safe havens for likeminded people who cannot express their true intentions, feelings and believes

in the offline communities (Norris et al., 2006). The reason why they have members depends on the fact that this premise is appealing for some people: which means that some agents feel that the offline domain is not a safe place for them to express themself and they ease the feeling of being stuck there, by participating in these communities (as reported by Ferreday (2003)). Moreover, some reports (Gailey, 2009) show that people who participate in these frameworks struggle with feelings of loss of control and, through the affiliation to these communities (as entering a state of Bad Faith), they feel as they can resume control. If we add that anorexia, bulimia, and similar self-harming habits arise and are often in conjunction with anxiety, shame, anguish, the similarity to a case of Bad Faith is even more prominent (Boero & Pascoe, 2012).

We can address the dangerousness of this phenomenon by discussing the fact that it creates a problematic asymmetry between online and offline domains. In a nutshell, it compromises the sense of responsibility these agents feel concerning the offline dimension. In the first section, we highlighted the significant differences between online and offline domains, and we argued that an asymmetry of contents resides in the entanglement between the two. The online world is a place for the extension and the support of one's cognitive and social attachments: in the self-harm communities, the relation goes in the opposite direction. If these communities let the agents express the part of their identity they recognize as authentic, then their offline dimension can be neglected, and they can lose a sense of accountability for it (Boero & Pascoe, 2012). In this case, indeed, the online reality does not provide simply an extension for one's identity and attachments, which people can integrate into the offline domain, but it is a way to direct it (Zinoviev et al., 2016). Thus, if it is reasonable to see Bad Faith as a rare phenomenon in online communities when it emerges and creates asymmetries between online and offline domains, it can lead to seriously problematic circumstances.

Conclusion

In the first section, we presented a naturalized and cognitive perspective on online communities, describing them as Virtual Cognitive Niches (Arfini et al., 2017). In the second section, we argued that online communities could favor the growth of a specific type of identity construction, based on what Rodogno (2012) called Attachment Theory, as they highlight the sense of self that is related to what the users care about, which shape their affective life and normative view of the world. We discuss the fact that a person can choose between three ways to get access in virtual cognitive niches: through a personal profile, an avatar, or a catfishing profile. By briefly referring to literature on this topic, we argued that the catfishing profile, which is clearly the most controversial type of identity reshaping online, could be seen as a radical way to express people's identity through self- attachments. Of course, ethical reflections followed. In the following subsection, we indeed discussed the Sartrean concept of Bad Faith. We analyzed that notion by focusing on four of its

aspect: its self-deceptive nature, its relationship to the idea of freedom that the agent in Bad Faith refuses, the problematic relationship with others that the condition produces (since it involves anxiety and shame), and the detrimental effect on the agent's sense of responsibility. We argued that it is reasonable to say that in online communities, the state of Bad Faith is not easy to recognize since the access to these framework implies a selection of features that the agent share with others (and herself). We also maintain that only one phenomenon online (among the ones we considered) can be rightfully labeled as a Bad Faith situation: the case of self-harm communities. The users in these frameworks actually feel anxiety and shame for their offline condition, find a way to deny it in the membership to these communities, and, in turn, loose sense of responsibility and attachment to their offline dimension through them. By considering their condition as more accurate in the online dimension, so, the subjects enter an identity crisis and turn the self-discovery that online communities afford them into a way to self-harm their offline identity.

Of course, our aim in this paper was not to present a comprehensive and exhaustive picture of the identity issues that online communities raise: in particular, our investigation is merely a theoretical and philosophical one. We did not conduct an empirical analysis and the examples that we take into consideration are illustrations at the service of theoretical argumentation. This theoretical arguments, though, can serve as a starting point for empirical studies and, hopefully, for reaching a better understanding of how identity construction is affected by the possibilities and limitations of these new cognitive environments.

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