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Introduction to Data Ethics

1
Defining Data Ethics

In his book *Tap*, Anindya Ghose imagines

> A future in which a company could send a coupon to a potential customer before she even leaves for a shopping trip that she didn't even know she was going to take.[1]

This future will be made possible by data technology that gathers, stores, and organizes information about users of Facebook, Amazon, Google, Verizon. Every time you log in, you add details about who your friends are (Facebook), what you're buying (Amazon), what's going on in your life (Gmail), and where you are (mobile phone towers need to locate you to provide service). All this data is stockpiled atop the information about age, gender, location, and the rest that you handed over when you created your account.

Then there are the databrokers—companies with less familiar names, Acxiom, for example—that buy the personal information from the original gatherers, and combine it with other data sources to form super-profiles, accumulated information about individuals that's so rich, companies can begin to predict when you will go shopping, and what you'll buy.

The gathering and uses of data go beyond the marketplace. Law enforcement organizations, anti-terrorism efforts, and other interests are also learning how to gather and use digital traces of human behavior, but the most compelling scenes of data ethics are also the most obvious: occasions where we volunteer information about ourselves as part of an exchange for some (usually quick) satisfaction. At its root, data ethics investigates this exchange. On one side there's the loss of control over the details that define who we are, on the other, there's the facility of getting what we want with little

effort. In a single sentence, what's going on is that privacy is being exchanged for convenience.

In straight theoretical terms, data ethics is the effort to evaluate and weigh privacy against convenience: *Which is worth more? When? Why?*

The human, palpable experience of data ethics is nervousness about personal information escaping our control. Equally, it's satisfactions facilitated by information algorithms. Finally, it's a sense of anxiety about how much of ourselves we should give up for the conveniences of digital reality. Here are some quick examples:

- We reveal our dimensions and passions to Tinder, and find romance by swiping a screen.
- We report our condition to SymptomChecker, and get diagnosed without enduring a waiting room.
- We allow AT&T Mobility to know where we are at every moment, and we're always able to text and talk, no matter where we are.

Underneath each exchange runs a dilemma between protecting elements of our identity, and satisfying our desires. Privacy versus convenience is a split between *who we are* and *what we want*.

The field of data ethics centers on consumers and marketing because that's where the trade of personal information for convenience is most direct. Then data ethics extends as the concept of *algorithmic capitalism*: it happens everywhere individuals and their desires interact with money and churning digital information.

About the information, ethical questions tend to rise and sharpen as the amount of information increases. The term big data refers to an amount of information expanding so far that it speeds past human comprehension. Typically, the expansion is measured in three directions, sometimes referred to as *3V*: volume, variety, velocity.[2] *Volume* is the number of datapoints on a table, or bytes flowing through an application, or the count of pixels in an image. The number of pixels and bits responsible for a Tinder match, for example, couldn't be counted by a human in a lifetime. *Variety* increases as the *sources* of data grow. On the Tinder platform, tabular data about people mixes with images, locations, and algorithms. As for *velocity*, that's the speed at which profiles are served to mobile screens, and matches get sorted algorithmically, and messages are sent from one device and received on another. For users, all that happens almost instantaneously.

Finally, the fundamental questions of data ethics are perennial, but subject to reconfiguration by emergent technologies. The basic investigations include:

- What is privacy?
- What is convenience?

- Why do we want privacy? How does privacy provide for personal identity? When is it worth protecting?
- When we let others access our personal information, what benefits and pleasures arise? Why are they worth having?

1.1 The example of *Tinder: Live*

Tinder: Live is a comedy show starring Lane Moore and captures the central dilemmas of data ethics. She projects her phone onto a big screen, begins swiping, and when algorithms churn information into a match, she messages the guy something absurd and suggestive. While subsequent exchanges amp up the provocation, Moore sips beer and spins a ridiculing narrative. Everyone has a good time in an uncomfortable sort of way and, in the end, because Tinder geofences users, and because the show runs in neighborhood bars, when Moore asks whether anyone in the room actually knows one of the night's victims, a hand or two usually goes up.[3]

The fundamental trade of data ethics is privacy for convenience. Tinder means your name, face, and numbers are exposed to the fingertips of strangers, the purposes of comedians, and the machinations of algorithms. But, there's no denying that it's easier to find romance when you can poke through a digitally curated list of others, get a match, send a message, and meet in under five minutes. The conclusion is that Tinder—especially as it's captured by *Tinder: Live*—is quintessential data ethics: privacy exchanged for convenience.

1.2 Tinder, privacy, identity

Audiences subjected to *Tinder: Live* emerge shell-shocked by the revealed vulnerability. When the lights come up, silence descends because everyone's frantically removing anything potentially ridiculous from their Tinder profiles. Which is prudent, but also a retreat: risk-free profiles become conventional, impersonal, dull. There's a palpable loss of edginess and unique individuality following the collapse of privacy at *Tinder: Live*.

The identity split is inescapable. On one side, for Tinder to work—for people to be drawn to each other—the online participants have to be someone, they need to take a risk, reveal something, give someone else a reason to say *Yes*. On the other side, the possibility that the data will be exposed to others with ulterior intentions—that it will turn up in front of a jeering audience, or maybe get sold to a corporate bidder—all that pulls in the other direction: toward an identity which is inconspicuous, unremarkable, anonymous. To the extent that second pull wins out, it's also true that Tinder—and the big data reality it represents—can be *neutering*. By making the effort to protect themselves, it can be that people don't allow themselves to *be* who they are.

There's another sense in which Tinder exemplifies the interaction of big data platforms with personal identity. It starts with Tinder's promise to curate: as you reveal the shape of

your desire by swiping left and right, algorithmic filters refine their output.[4] So, a woman initially served random nearby males, progresses to guys in their twenties who like music, and ends up receiving image after image of twenty-seven yearolds who play in jazz ensembles.

This curation becomes a kind of *identity prison*. Because we're constantly sent possibilities selected to resemble what we've already liked, we're incessantly confirmed as who we already are. At least in terms of romantic interest, there's no escape: the feedback loop turns, and Tinder keeps returning us to our old flame, but with a different name.

The romantic reality mirrors the individual condition: just like you can't get to a different relationship when the same one keeps repeating, so too you can't become a different person when everything delivered into your experience repeats what you already are. (In this sense, Lane Moore is a Tinder disaster not only because she mocks the platform, but also because she screws up the algorithm. Since she lets audience members choose her guys, the funneling curation is constantly frustrated.)

A third type of oppressive interaction between big data processing and personal identity starts with technological advances that allow companies to store massive amounts of data for future use. That capability intersects with this reality: everyone has exceptional moments in their lives, and these may be significant accomplishments that accurately reflect a deep truth about our existence. An example would be a judge whose lifelong dedication to the law is rewarded with a nomination to a significant bench. But, there are also exceptional moments that are *exceptions*. They may be notable, but they don't necessarily reflect much about the full span of an individual's existence. Even so, internet scouring robots will likely find some evidence of these moments no matter how long ago, and then relentlessly attach them to our current reality.

Take the case of a neighborhood toddler gymnasium run for decades by a woman who fell into a bizarre conflict with a neighbor. Their colorful battle ended up in the local, national, and international press, and will forever govern who she is, at least as it's determined by the grinding force of online search engines.[5]

The relentless big data power to connect names, places, and people through time and across diverse information sources means that the most digitally harvestable event of an individual's biography—even if it's only tangential to the lifetime trajectory—threatens to dominate the identity. This is a point Edward Snowden consistently and unsurprisingly makes: one isolated mistake in one's past, at one time was something you could outgrow (people would forget), or move away from (in a new town, no one's heard the story). Now, however, one episode can become inescapable.[6]

1.3 Ethics of privacy and identity: Should you delete the Tinder app?

The ethical dilemma surrounding big data involves privacy and exposure, and becomes real as a threat to identity: *I can't be me*, and *I can't be someone else*. I can't be me because I don't want to be ridiculed on *Tinder: Live*, so my profile retreats toward the anonymity of the inconspicuous. I can't be someone else because the Tinder feedback loop keeps setting me up with the same partner (different name) over and again. In the end, the basic ethical argument against Tinder (within the scope of data ethics) is that the cost to privacy and individuality is too great, the loss is not worth the convenience

On the other side, the ethics of convenience stands in in favor of Tinder. First, finding someone by touching a screen is good. No one seriously denies that Tinder works (just count the downloads), and while users don’t always get what they want, when they do, it comes faster and easier than it would otherwise. So, facility holds intrinsic value: algorithmic romance is worth having.

But what about the objection that the price is too high (even when, or especially when, it's free)? We might meet someone almost effortlessly, but we definitely lose privacy and, consequently, identity. There are two responses:

1.
The trade-off is worth it. Even if privacy and the ability to define ourselves in the world is diminished by Tinder, the benefits outweigh them. That's why the app is so popular. So, it may be that my profile gets ridiculed at *Tinder: Live*. And, it may be that fear of ridicule leads me to tone down my opinions and expressions and become bland, but that's an acceptable cost for the romantic benefit. As long as Tinder keeps setting me up, I'm fine with the sacrifices. More, it may also be that I keep getting set up with the same kind of person, and it may be that I'm getting into a rut where the identical story keeps playing out, but that's still better than a blind date, or the singles’ bar. I'm just willing to sacrifice some uniqueness and variety in life for an almost sure thing. In straight ethical terms, what I get as convenience is worth more than what I surrender of my privacy.

2.
The dilemma is false. The collapse of privacy doesn't necessarily lead to the constriction and loss of identity, only to a requirement: new strategies need to be developed to create unique selves in a world without privacy. In other words, we can learn to be just fine in a reality without privacy. So, it may be hard to play the game of romance (to pose as cool, or seductive, or darkly intriguing, or warm and caring) when there's the overhanging threat that you'll be highlighted and ridiculed at *Tinder: Live*, but hard is not the same as impossible. Even if everyone already knows everything about us—and even if our information is totally exposed to the uses and abuses of others—we can still find ways to be someone interesting and unique, and we'll still find opportunities to become someone new, to try new things and people

> and experiences. In straight ethical terms, we don't need privacy to craft an identity for ourselves. Stronger, we may not need privacy at all.

Finally, *Tinder: Live* asks a simple question that echoes the fundamental big data dilemma: Is it worth it? Should I delete the social app, or sign up for two more? What's more valuable, the privacy I could preserve, or the facility I may gain?

2
What is Privacy, and What is at Stake with Privacy?

Privacy is control over access to ourselves. Privacy is the *ability* we have to determine what others know about us.

Most of us don't have a problem with letting others know our name, or see the image of our face; anyone with a Facebook account is more or less conceding that this is open information. But, there are closer details we restrict to friends and familiar others: a phone number, a home address. Some things are known only within the family. Then, there are thoughts, fears, and desires kept to ourselves. Privacy doesn't correspond with any one of these personal exposure levels; it has nothing to do with the specifics of who knows what. Instead, it's the power to create and maintain the exposure distinctions: privacy means you *control* who knows what.

What is it that's controlled? Access to ourselves involves: driving desires, guiding memories, defining numbers, capturing images, incarnating bodies. It's all the ways that we can be *conceived* as individuals, and all the many ways that we can be touched.

2.1 Refining privacy

Four distinctions advance privacy's definition. First, privacy is not a synonym for secrecy; privacy is the ability to decide what remains secret, and from whom. Second, privacy does not mean the right to be left alone. A private moment may be solitary, or it may involve many others (a wedding, a funeral). Either alone or accompanied, privacy exists when you *determine* who's there. Third, the loss of privacy is *exposure*, which does not mean that others access you, but that you are vulnerable to their explorations. Fourth, privacy is a verb, not a noun. Privacy is not something we have, it's something we *do*. It's not a possession, it is an *ability*, or a power.

Two examples of privacy help separate the accurate conception from other possibilities. First, at the end of a beach day, people on the sand nearby may notice that I've wrapped myself in a towel and dropped off my wet swimsuit underneath. While I feel embarrassed by the attention drawn to my imperfect physique, I'm not bothered. I am disgusted, however, later on when a hidden camera in my hotel room snaps pictures of me wrapped

in the same towel after my shower. It's an identical view, but a difference of control. The split between embarrassment and disgust marks the divide between privacy and its violation.

Second, in a United States Congressional hearing dealing with surveillance technology, a congressman maintained that individuals' privacy can't be violated if they *don't know* their information has been gathered. It can't, the argument goes, because the gathering causes no harm. As long as I don't find out that my personal details were exposed, then nothing will change in the way I live. It literally doesn't make any difference. So, ignorance may not be bliss, but it does invalidate accusations of privacy violation. Against this view, an expert witness disagreed by maintaining that a tree falling in the woods makes a noise, even if no one is there to hear it. The witness was wrong about the noise, but right about privacy. If our information is collected without our knowledge, then by definition we have lost control over access to ourselves.[7]

One way to envision privacy is through concentric circles and independent rings. Privacy's traditional conception pictures concentric circles. The one individual occupies the outermost circle, meaning he or she has access to all information. The next interior circle might hold a spouse, who has access to all but the individual's most intimate knowledge. Then the family, and a circle for friends, and finally the open space of society. Those inhabiting each ring have access to everything within their circle, but cannot penetrate the information outside.[8]

The reality distinct, it's a less symmetrical distribution of information. While it remains true that for each person only the one has access to all information, after that, others occupy contoured shapes of access: a friend may have access to details of the past that even a spouse is denied, while other information is accessible for the spouse but not the friend, and so on.[9]

A final way to think about privacy is at the extremes. Privacy functions defensively—the ability to shield ourselves from prying eyes—but it's equally true that privacy requires the positive ability to *share* information: you don't control what you can't distribute. So, theoretically, there are two zero-privacy extremes. At one end, you are completely exposed: you cannot hide anything, from anyone. At the other, you are entirely muted and alone: you can disclose nothing, to no one. Either way, you have no privacy because you have no control over access to yourself.

2.2 The end of privacy

One efficient way to deal with privacy is to say it's over. There are four versions of the end:

- You shouldn't want privacy
- You shouldn't have privacy

- Privacy is just a phase we went through
- Privacy overcomes itself as transparency

Starting with you shouldn't want privacy, in 1999 Sun Microsystems CEO Scott McNealy notoriously claimed, "You have zero privacy anyway. Get over it."[10] The problem with asserting that we should get over wanting privacy is what's at stake: privacy isn't just about personal information, it's also a power, the ability to restrict access to ourselves. So, accepting a zero-privacy reality means more than surrendering all secrets, it also implies surrendering the ability to not surrender. That's a lot to lose.

In sum, the argument is that even if we have zero privacy, we shouldn't just get over it because that means giving up even more. This point is sometimes made in the general terms of what's called an is/ought distinction. Facts don't automatically convert into moral imperatives: just because we don't have privacy doesn't mean we ought to stop trying.

The second stance taken against privacy is that you shouldn't have it. In the words of Google CEO Eric Schmidt, "If you have something that you don't want anyone to know, maybe you shouldn't be doing it."[11] The problem here is that privacy doesn't just hide moral blemishes, it's also required for each of us to select how we present ourselves to the world. There's nothing morally embarrassing, for example, about flipping through pictures of yourself to select which ones you want to display on, say, Tinder. That's the way you show others who you are, and who you're not. (That's why you don't include snapshots from the 70's disco party you went to for New Year's.) But the entire effect is ruined if others can freely thumb through *all* your pictures, or whichever ones *they* choose. Privacy, in other words, is a positive ability more than a shelter for delinquency and perversion.

The third stand against privacy is that, in sweeping historical terms, privacy is just a phase we went through. Vinton Cerf, one if the true inventors of the internet, proposed:

> Privacy emerged out of the urban boom coming from the industrial revolution, and may be an historical anomaly.[12] < >

Some researchers support him. Especially with respect to habitational space in western societies, partitions we consider salutary are, in historical terms, fairly recent. Until the 17th century, for example, even aristocrats commonly shared a sleeping room with non-intimate others, including their servants.[13] If that's right, the reasoning goes, then the unveiling of all our personal information for all the world to see on the internet is not a deviation from the historical norm, it's a return. It's normal for people to know a lot about others.

Of the various arguments commonly raised against privacy, this one may be the most interesting. That doesn't save it from being fundamentally misguided, though. The problem is a basic misunderstanding. Privacy is an ability, not a dataset. It’s the power I have to control access to my information, not the absence or presence of my personal information in the public realm. For example, privacy could exist perfectly in a nudist colony with a single common habitation and one login password shared by everyone. As long as the participants had *decided* on this degree of openness, their lives are perfectly private.

So, it may be true that social media platforms including Tinder stockpile countless bytes describing each user, and it may be that more esoteric databrokers buy and then trade that information. But, there’s no necessary correlation between that accumulation, and the answer to the question about whether privacy exists. The stockpiling only invites a question about consent: Do users *care* whether the platforms gather and trade their data? Do they agree to allow it? If they do, then there's no reason to think that privacy has gone out of style.

The most sophisticated reasoning against privacy is that it overcomes itself as transparency. The structure of the argument is familiar to philosophers, and starts from the observation that many concepts carry within themselves a kind of inflection point or vulnerability, that is, a point where the kind of thinking that presumably *supports* the larger idea actually *corrupts* it.

One of the oldest examples comes from medieval theology. The argument starts from the premise that God is all powerful, and pushes in various directions (God can part the waters of the sea, God can flood the earth) until reaching a question like this: *Can God make a boulder so heavy that He can’t move it?*

An analogous inflection point exists at the core of rights theory. The critical question is: *Can you sell yourself into slavery?* This is a dilemma because the ethics of rights is built on freedom maximization: Everyone can do whatever they want, up to the point where their free acts interfere with the freedoms of others. For example, within this ethics you're free to drink whatever, whenever, but you cannot drink alcohol (to excess) and drive because that endangers others, and so threatens *their* freedom to make decisions about what and when they will drink. So, if the basic value is freedom, the question arises: *Is my freedom so great that I'm free to cancel it?*

It's hard to know.

Regardless, a similar dilemma rises around privacy. If privacy means control over access to my personal information, *can I control by deciding to not control?* Does my own privacy grant me the right to allow pure transparency?

What's at stake here is the possibility of a *transparent self*. Instead of thinking about data accumulation and algorithmic capitalism as antithetical to privacy, they serve the purest version, the one where control over access to ourselves maximizes (or overcomes itself) as total access for all.

Here are some of the questions surrounding the possibility of the transparent self.

- In the real world, is it possible to become transparent?
- Is it possible to want and embrace a reality where every detail—even my most intimate secrets and fears—are revealed?
- What would it look like—how would you spend your day—if your body, your information, your aspirations were all open to everyone, all the time?

2.3 What is at stake with privacy?

Privacy is about personal identity; the reason privacy is worth having is because you need it to be *someone*.

Everyone has paused before tapping the submit button. Maybe it's the messaging screen on Tinder, or the compose screen on Gmail. Regardless, there's indecision: words are waiting to be sent to a stranger, or to a daughter, or to a friend, or a boss, or someone and, just before irrevocably transmitting, there's a stop to consider. You're deciding: Do I really want to send this?

The duration is the time of privacy and identity.

Whatever those words are, you need a moment for them to be *not* sent. You need to be alone with them to weigh whether you want to be the person those words will create. For example, using Tinder, maybe you wait for a moment before sending because you need to take a breath and decide whether you're the kind of person who sparks an encounter with a financier who loves money. Or, using Gmail, maybe you hesitate before sending because you need to choose whether you're the kind of employee who'll promise to fabricate a time sheet for a supervisor who missed a shift. Or, maybe it’s something else, but regardless of what the indecision concerns, and no matter what the ultimate determination is, we hesitate because we understand that our identity—the person who uses our name—depends on the decision.

And the decision depends on privacy. If someone peers over your shoulder while you're considering, it's not just an annoyance, it's someone else *getting involved*. Because they’re distorting your thinking, the decision no longer belongs to you alone.

The situation mirrors the diabolical instruction to *Be spontaneous!* As soon as someone says that, following the instruction becomes impossible: before you even start, you're

already *not* being spontaneous. The same goes for identity, the moment someone is looking, watching your thumb hesitate on Tinder, reading your Gmail, you're no longer deciding entirely for yourself.

So, what gets put at stake with privacy is your ability to decide for yourself who you are.

Another connection between privacy and identity traces the word “person” back to its Latin origins, where it connects with *persona* in the theatrical sense, like a mask.

To an extent, our identity is always a mask: I’m a father in the morning, an employee in the afternoon, a husband in the evening. If you think about identity in this masking way, then in order to develop a new role—in order to evolve or become someone different—you need a rehearsal space where you can test the new persona without fear of ridicule or abuse.

Everyone has retreated to these private spaces for personal experimentation. It could be:

- In a quiet basement, the student contemplating doing stand-up comedy runs a few routines past his friends. (Maybe they laugh heartily.)
- Around a dinner table, the woman considering adhering to the Jewish faith confides in her family. (Maybe they support her.)
- In front of a mirror, a man speaks a marriage proposal. (Maybe he can’t convince himself of his own words.)
- Along the rail of a quiet bar, a lawyer considering running for a judgeship shares the aspiration with the firm's senior partners. (Maybe they keep drinking and change the subject.)

There's no end to the identities we may want to try, and will only try if we’re afforded a private rehearsal, an opportunity to try the role with access strictly limited.

So, just as we can’t decide who we *are* without privacy, so too we can’t *develop* into someone else. The formal conclusion is that privacy is required to be someone, and to become someone else.

2.4 Conclusion: Extremes of privacy and identity

Theoretically, there are two zero-privacy extremes; they correspond with the individual who is anyone, and who is no one.

At the surveillance extreme where you’re constantly observed and never able to limit access to yourself, you tend toward being anyone: always under observation, you’re squeezed into conformity, into the conventional and indistinguishable.

At the solitude extreme where you're unable to disclose anything about yourself, you'll be no one: never able to reveal a desire, a fear, an aspiration; there'll be no way to become unique, to be different from others.

Identity only exists, finally where privacy exists.

3
What is Convenience, and What's at Stake with Convenience?

The exchange grounding data ethics is privacy for convenience. Platforms including Tinder get some control over access to their users' personal information in exchange for quick pairing with a romantic partner. Google gets a chance to peek at what's being emailed by providing a high quality service at no cost beyond some privacy loss. In both examples, data platforms are offering a twin benefit: a kind of enjoyment, coupled with decreased effort. Convenience, consequently, is enjoyment, with effort decreasing toward zero, which would be the state of *pure convenience*.

Tinder provides convenience: romantic enjoyment comes with decreasing effort. *Pure* convenience remains a long way off, still, every profile added to the platform nudges users in that direction in two ways. First, every new image delivered to the screen is one less person that needs to be sought in a busy, noisy club, and every profile read quickly is one less (probably) tedious conversation for potential suitors. It's just much easier to do the preliminary sorting of possibilities from impossibilities with a screen then with human interaction. Second, and perhaps more importantly, every time images and profiles are swiped right or left, the Tinder filtering algorithm tightens: it better predicts what users want, and delivers it still more efficiently.

There are experiences that approach purity in convenience. The IMAX theater, for example, located steps from the Grand Canyon promises, according to its webpage:

> A giant six-story movie screen and 12,000 watts of digital surround sound allows visitors to literally experience the Grand Canyon as if they were actually there.[14]

The same webpage offers helicopter and jeep tours into the real canyon, but why bother?

3.1 Convenience and the end of effort

There are two views of effort. One is that effort is simple exertion, a loss of energy. Correspondingly, the elimination of effort is an unqualified good. The other view is that effort contains both exertion *and* authenticity.

The idea that exertion contains authenticity means that laboring for something—hiking into the Grand Canyon, for example—is not only an expenditure of movement and sweat, it's also the formation of a *connection*, one that's distinct from the link formed by pure

enjoyment. Effort, almost a kind of *sense*, not entirely unrelated to seeing and touching. When you invest sweat and muscle into a climb, you don't just drip salty beads into the dirt while kicking stones along the pathways, you also take something from the dirt and stones, you *learn* something about the contours and demands of the place. You sense what it requires, in the same way that you see the colors and taste the dust in the air. This requirement, finally, is part of what a place *is*. And if effort is part of what a place is, then experience is authentic—complete, penetrating, real—when you suffer for, and into it.

The conclusion is that if effort is nothing more than exertion, then pure convenience is desirable and achievable. It's a purification of enjoyment. At the Grand Canyon, consequently, a virtual reality experience might be even better than the real thing. By contrast, if effort carries authenticity, then pure convenience may or may not be desirable, but it's definitely not achievable because having it means *losing* an essential part of what you want. At the Grand Canyon, in other words, the real thing is the only way to get the full experience, no matter how advanced the artificial reality technology.

3.2 Pure convenience and the end of desire

Pure convenience extinguishes desire because the perfected state of convenience means a response to your wants will be produced *even before* you know what you want. If convenience is truly *absolute*, then there cannot exist even a moment of dissatisfaction, not even a split second where your desires have not yet been relieved. It follows that the feeling of desire disappears in the reality of absolute convenience because there's never enough time to realize that we don't already have everything we want.

Pushing that possibility further, if the triumph of convenience means the end of desire, then there's also a link between convenience and the most traditional relief from the ache of wanting: death. On one level, big data factories and their disseminating platforms—Tinder, Amazon, Facebook—are suicide machines, which is not necessarily an argument against them.

3.3 What's at stake with convenience?

Convenience purifies, accelerates, and multiplies scenes of enjoyment.

Starting with purification, as effort drops toward zero, enjoyment may not increase in intensity, but it does minimize distractions and interference. At the Grand Canyon, for example, the IMAX theater doesn't only promise an experience of the geography, it also helps maintain focus on the natural wonder by guaranteeing "a temperature controlled environment that will keep all guests comfortable." Similarly on Tinder, distractions and interferences recede as potential partners unsuited to the users' desires are filtered out, and as the big data churning relentlessly finds better possibilities in still closer geographic range.

With respect to the acceleration of pleasure, Tinder generates an efficiency benefit that could be measured as the number of others someone swipes or meets in a month, as compared to life without the application. Tinder *speeds* experience, it presses more enjoyment into the same number of hours. Stated inversely, convenience is a time fabricator: more time exists to do other things when some are dispatched quickly.

Convenience also multiplies kinds of pleasure. Tinder is a pleasure engine in the sense that it generates different *types* of enjoyments. On the theoretical level this is true by definition. Innovative conveniences necessarily allow us to imagine at least one new way of living (life *with* the convenience, as opposed to without). From there, more concrete and innovative kinds of pleasures emerge. Tinder inaugurates the enjoyments of:

- Hilarity and anxiety mixed at *Tinder: Live*
- Satirical message exchanges by users who aren't really seeking matches
- Cluster courting: a guy supported by his friends messaging on one side, against a woman and her friends.

Some convenience engines will prove more potent than others, but any time new scenes of pleasure enter experience, there's palpable value, something worth having.

3.4 Convenience and the happinesses of happiness

One of the virtues of happiness is that most everyone agrees it's worth having: it's valuable *intrinsically*. Where people disagree: What *counts* as happiness? How do we know when we have it?

Two central possibilities run through the ideas of hedonistic and idealistic pleasure. The hedonistic pleasure model roots in our bodies, and finds inspiration in what feels good. This is the laughter encountered at *Tinder: Live*, and the fleshy sensations found by some Tinder users. Certainly happiness is not limited to carnal pleasure, but that's the baseline, and the reference.

Distinctly, idealistic pleasure begins with our minds, and conceives happiness as intellectual satisfaction. These are the human insights pried open at *Tinder: Live*, and the analytic curiosities of big data's application to social media platforms. Certainly there's more to it than cognitive fulfillment or cerebral appreciation, but that's the core experience.

Convenience can serve both styles of happiness, and in fact it does at *Tinder: Live* where you get frequent chuckles, and occasional human truths.

3.5 A problem with convenience

Through philosophy's history, convenience has been regarded with suspicion. Plato's *Phaedrus* contains one of history's original studies of convenience: the invention of writing. It allows public speakers to enthusiastically deliver their words without having to

first grind them into their consciousness. That's positive, but when Plato addressed the convenience rising from writing's invention, he also introduced an irony: while writing is supposed to aid our memory, it actually creates forgetfulness because once we start jotting things down, we'll stop exercising our ability to remember.

Centuries later, Karl Marx and Martin Heidegger affirmed—each in his own way—that people understood their place in the world at least partly through their labor. So, the diminishing of work and initiative automatically threatens our ability to understand and define ourselves.

The consistent message is that there may be something *corrupting* lurking in convenience.

4
Big Data, and Surveillance, AI

The *material* of small data is indistinguishable from the substance of big data. Both compose from numbers that measure (age, height, weight), words that describe (gender, race), directions that map (my phone constantly transmitting my movements), colors that shape (the color of my car, my house, my shirt), sounds that resonate (Amazon's Alexa hears when I'm scolding my daughter), desires that impel (Google knows my searches), and all the rest that we can render as descriptive and predictive of humans in the world.

The differences between small and big data begin with processing. Small data can be processed *biologically*; big data must be subjected to tables that organize, formulas that quantify, and then electric algorithms that render.

The split widens with the following: big data is information increasing past human comprehension, and in three directions: volume, velocity, variety. Sometimes this triad is abbreviated as 3V. Either way, volume is the simple amount of information. On the 3rd and 4th of August, 2010, for example, more data was produced than all that stretching from year 0 to January 1st, 2003. There was nothing unusual about the 3rd and 4th as data days.[15] More, the pace of volume expansion has only increased since 2010. Velocity is the speed at which information gathered, organized and applied to lived experience. The Titan supercomputer (Oak Ridge), for example, performs 27,112,500,000,000,000 calculations per second.[16] Finally, variety is the multiplication of information sources: image information gleaned from video cameras synthesizes with naming information associated with facial recognition, and with consumption preferences gleaned from credit card data and so on. The variety comprehension threshold may not have been crossed yet, but that's the direction.

4.1

Data pools: transparent and dark

There are two kinds of information pools on the level of big data. *Transparent* pools of data derive from explicit exchanges of personal information for services. The exchange is explicit in the sense that you know you are handing over personal details (name, address, education, previous jobs, and similar), and you know that you are getting a technological convenience (LinkedIn helps you find a job). Instead of paying with cash, that means, you sell a layer of yourself for the service. Privacy becomes a currency. The implication is that platforms including LinkedIn, Tinder and Facebook *do* charge for their services, but not dollars; instead, they're paid with data streams: they traffic in details about their users' identity, location, disposition, and more.[17]

There is a specific privacy debate surrounding transparent data pools, it involves informed consent. Informed consent means that when you strike an agreement, your assent comes only after you've *understood* the terms of the exchange. It may not be a *full* comprehension (few of us know everything about anything), but the term does imply a broad understanding of what's transpiring.

The question about informed consent comes with a ubiquitous checkbox. Tinder, Twitter, LinkedIn, and the rest, one thing they have in common is the small box where users agree to the platform's terms and conditions before their account is activated.

Now, it's true that users check the small box acknowledging acceptance of the terms of service, and so we all know, on some level, that we're willingly trading away access to our personal information for access to the platform, but questions remain:

- Do users fully understand the *extent* of their exposure?
- If they don't, is that on them? If users' lack the patience to carefully read and understand the agreements they claim they've read and understood, then can they reasonably complain when they've signed (or checked) away more privacy than they thought?
- Or, are users being manipulated by small print and intentionally impenetrable language? Can users reasonably claim to be duped and exploited by check box that looks like almost nothing, but may entail quite a bit?

Moving from transparent to *dark data pools*, the information found here comes from third parties that purchase data from direct collectors including Tinder, Facebook, and LinkedIn, and then combine and process the personal details into richer profiles, before selling back into the consumer-oriented marketplace.

For example, the data traded to Tinder (romance), Enolytics (wine), and SymptomChecker (health) may be purchased by the databroker Acxiom, where it's

combined with other purchased information before being resold to strategic merchants. This behind-the-scenes activity explains how merchants make connections.

In human terms, the connections may unwind this way. You delete your Tinder account. That suggests the app may have accomplished its purpose: you've entered a serious romance. Tinder doesn't care too much about that information because their platform is oriented toward the young and single, but a travel company may want to combine the romantic news with your particular interest in wine. They offer you a romantic trip to an obscure wine-growing region that happens to produce the bottles you love. You may take the trip (with the partner Tinder set up), and it may be a great ten days. Later, another company may be interested in a mix of all that romantic data with some more recent information about your queries to WebMD. That may lead to targeted banner ads—biodegradable diapers, the virtues of Montessori preschool for cognitive development—popping up on your screens. The point is, datasets don't accumulate as addition, but as multiplication. When information about different aspects of your life gets put together, the emerging profile can be very telling.

The privacy debate surrounding dark data pools involves *ownership*. When you download an app after trading a layer of privacy for the convenience, are you trading:

- A kind of *license* allowing that specific information to be used by that one platform, perhaps for a limited set of purposes?
- The *information itself*, which now becomes wholly the property of the platform, and may be packaged and resold and used in any way whatsoever?

There's a legal answer to this question (check the small print in the service agreement), but the ethical question involves the relation between individuals and the information describing them. It could be argued that the bond between me and my data resembles the one between me and my biological life: the data can't be entirely separated from what it means to *be* me. If that's persuasive, then I maintain some claim on my personal information regardless of the boxes I've checked. Like my life will always ultimately be mine, so too the data that describes my life.

By contrast, if the information is conceived as something I fabricate, like a carpenter makes a chair, then when the data is sold, whoever acquires it bears no responsibility to the originator. (It has never happened that a carpenter barged into a client's house and asked for his chair back because the owner decided to paint it a different color.)

There is a curious middle ground. Sometimes artists will object to uses made of their works, and architects will object to remodeling efforts they view as crudely destructive of their buildings. Probably there's no legal force behind the protests, but they may find traction in human terms.

4.2 From small to big data: threshold

The elementary content of small data is indistinguishable from big data (numbers, words, directions, colors, sounds, desires). But, as the volume of information and the velocity of processing surge past human comprehension, the experience of the material changes.

The historical analogy is Zeno's paradox, but the contemporary comparison is the movement from still images to video. Take a string of very similar images, like a string of pictures of a horse running, each taken a fraction of a second from the previous. When they are stacked and flipped at a rate of thirty frames per second, what we see is not a vast number of individual pictures at a very high speed. Instead, something radically different: it looks like the horse is running. In other words, there's no longer a set of images but a single video, and it is *other* than the frames; it's not an evolution, it's revolution, a different kind of vision and reality.

There's a threshold: the volume and speed of the individual images increases until the sequence collapses back into the unity. Multiple pictures become a single video.

Similarly in the movement from small to big data: it's not more of the same, only faster. It's a threshold. Big data doesn't evolve from small data experience, instead it's a leap into a different reality. The task of data ethics is to adapt traditional ethical rules to the new reality where possible, and create new rules where necessary.

4.3 What distinguishes big data from surveillance and AI?

The term "big data," often overlaps with "surveillance," and "AI." Because all three terms apply to fields of rapid innovation, it's difficult to confidently articulate definitions. In broad strokes, however, and within the context of data ethics, surveillance is gathering and recording information for processing and/or analysis. Amplified by technology, the accumulation and processing escapes comprehensible proportions. For example, more than three million times a day Amazon adds a set of purchasing choices to consumer profiles already containing names, addresses, physical characteristics (the dress you bought had a size), aspirations (only certain people buy *How to Play Poker Against the Pros*), personal attachments (the shipping addresses not corresponding with your home), and so on.

With respect to artificial intelligence (AI), in the literal sense there is no such thing: machines organize information, they don't think creatively. Augmented intelligence is more accurate. Regardless, the term signifies the filtering and arranging of information at superhuman levels of efficiency. AI machines help us think more powerfully than biology allows, just as mechanical machines like cranes help lift more powerfully.

Big Data unites surveillance and AI: Information of all types is gathered on scales, and organized at speeds overwhelming human abilities. Just as individuals are incapable of

out-muscling heavy machinery, and therefore unable to overpower it, so too individuals are incapable of comprehending big data, and therefore unable to out-maneuver it.

4.4 What distinguishes surveillance, monitoring, and tracking?
Data gathering, processing, and application—along with subsequent philosophical and ethical debates—occur on three levels: social, emotional, and economic.

On the social level, the gathering falls under the title of surveillance. It is executed by society generally, typically through governmental institutions. Surveillance is also *aimed* at society generally, meaning the civilian population, and the purpose is usually public security and welfare. Surveillance would include screening email to detect signs of impending terrorism, or scanning car license-plates to study traffic patterns.

On the emotional level, data gathering falls under the title of monitoring. It is executed by discrete individuals, and also aimed at discrete individuals. Its purpose involves modulating personal emotions. Examples of monitoring would include the collegian lingering at the bar to see if the girl he likes gets affectionate with the Lacrosse player, or Google Glass wedded to Google Lens.

On the economic level, the gathering falls under the title of *tracking*. It is executed by private enterprises and aimed at consumers. The purpose is *targeting*, it is to communicate with consumers in optimal ways, and at appropriate times and places. The end goal is generally profit. At the rudimentary stage, an example of tracking would be a retailer using loyalty cards to track purchases and learn what specific patrons' have found desirable, and then to target those patrons with specific offers. More advanced tracking and targeting combines information from various sources and seeks to make predictions about consumption practices.[18]

Conceptually, a critical moment in the development of tracking and targeting occurs when data escapes commercial silos. That is, when information gathered by a retailer (maternity clothes purchased) is used to promote a *distinct service* (natural birthing centers begin sending mailers to expecting mothers). At this moment, data becomes an *independent* sources of economic activity. Organizations engaging in no direct consumer interactions acquire information from retailers, social media platforms, government agencies and similar, to synthesize and then resell to the original gatherers as fuller profiles. Data, in other words, acquires an intrinsic and measurable economic value.

5
Data Ethics Debate: Privacy and Identity versus Convenience

Emerging big data technology generates questions on multiple levels: electrical engineers face problems involving the organization of datasets, retailers struggle to convert

consumer information into purchases. On the level of philosophy and ethics, this is a pressing question: Is my privacy and identity worth more than my convenience? Is *who I am* worth more than *how I am?*

Stated slightly differently, the debate starts from the premise that big data technology can suppress personal identity, while increasing comfort and facilitating happiness in our everyday lives. From there, it goes on to evaluate how the technology sets *individual initiative*, which is gratifying but difficult, against *accommodation*, which is pleasurable and alleviating, but also depersonalizing.

5.1 Privacy and identity against big data convenience

Regardless of how the debate is termed, the most accessible way into a discussion begins with privacy defined as control over access to our personal information, and then advances to by asking two questions.

The first is the neutered identity question: *Is the loss of privacy engineered by big data platforms preventing us from forming a concept of who we are as individuals?* As the *Tinder: Live* reality demonstrates, when we surrender control over the intimate details that define our identity, the risk of exploitation and ridicule surges. Consequently, it's going to be tempting to retreat into anonymity, into a reality of self-expression where we don't try to do or say anything that could offend, or be ridiculed, or that could set us apart from others. Simply as a thought experiment, any one of us can imagine being live-streamed all the time, without editing. If that were to happen, it seems like we would be unable to exist as anything but a performer, as men and women always existing for others and never for ourselves.

The second question is the feedback loop/identity prison question: *Is the loss of privacy engineered by big data platforms preventing us from changing and becoming someone new?* Tinder, Amazon, Facebook, Netflix, they all curate: as you reveal what you want and like, they respond by feeding you more of it. Tinder keeps setting you up with the same partner, Amazon recommends more books on the same subject, Facebook conforms your news feed to fit your ideology, and Netflix keeps pointing you toward different versions of the same movie. As life gets easier, changing your life becomes more difficult. At the extreme, you can't become someone different because everything delivered into your experience reinforces who you already are.

Conclusion. The privacy and identity concern is that big data conveniences can prohibit us from being someone, and prohibit us from becoming someone else.

5.2 Philosophy and privacy, identity, convenience

One way that philosophy engages the privacy and identity versus convenience dilemma with a thought experiment formulated to test the quality of life in a world of *pure*

convenience. The experiment loosely corresponds with the science fiction movie *Total Recall* where people go under sedation and into an electrode headwrap before living a thrilling episode entirely in their mind. (While other films and books play on the same idea, what makes *Total Recall* exemplary is that the brain-trips are what people do for their vacations. In other words, pleasure is reaching the degree of pure convenience.)

The unblemished convenience corresponds with the complete absence of privacy. In order to create a durable and fantastic memory of a time that never happened, the mind device is equipped with probing electrodes. They map the subject's deepest secrets, desires, and fears, and exploit them to create an immersive, exciting, and harrowing artificial reality.

Shifting the scenario from cinema to academic philosophy, Robert Nozick proposed an *Experience Machine*.[19] You float in a warm-water tank while a neurological apparatus sparks your synapses in delightful ways. The question Nozick asks about his machine echoes the one premising *Total Recall*: Would you trade your sometimes frustrating embodied life for the data flood of generated reality?

Nozick suspects not, for three reasons:

- Competition: We want to be better than others (win the tennis match, lure the elusive partner, triumph at the office), not just process those satisfactions in our minds.
- Be (noun): We want to *be* someone, to have a palpable existence that can be touched, heard, and felt, instead of tracing back to fleeting neurons and digital realities.
- To be: (verb): We want to do what we will remember. We want to *make* something of ourselves, not just watch and feel our lives play out in our head.

At bottom, each of these objections to the Experience Machine (or the *Total Recall* vacation) is a defense of personal identity. It's the claim that making my own life, even if it doesn't always feel good, is better than feeling good about a life that's made for me.

The question remains open.

What makes the Experience Machine interesting in the history of philosophy is a critical twist. Called Nozick's Library, the apparatus comes with a collection of preconceived lives. One creates you as a dominating musician, another promises life-saving doctoring. There's the story of the compelling actress, the vital athlete, the enchanting bohemian, and innumerable others. The point is, if you're going to live an artificial reality, why be limited to your own imagination? Instead of asking for the Experience Machine to fulfill your own aspirations, you may find that someone else's dreams sound better, so why not go for those?

If that's the route taken, then personal identity gets threatened twice. First, there's the exchange of lived existence for a fantasy. Second, the fantasy isn't even yours.

The conclusion is that Nozick's Library presses the privacy and identity versus convenience dilemma to its climax. When the life you experience was programmed by another, convenience is maximized (you don't even have to bother to compose the existence you want), while your personal identity is doubly erased.

5.3 Real-world decisions: incremental, sporadic, concealed

One attraction of the Experience Machine is that it puts everything in the black and white of a binary choice: Make and be yourself in a world that resists your efforts, or, satisfy your craving for pleasure with a convenient but impersonal neural device.

In the real data ethics world as we live it today, the choice isn't a binary and obvious so much as incremental, sporadic, and frequently concealed.

- Incremental: The Experience Machine is all or nothing. But, with Tinder, Amazon, and Google, you sacrifice a degree of privacy for a bit of convenience.
- Sporadic: The Experience Machine can last a biological lifetime (once you go into the device, maybe you don't come out). But today's interaction with data reality flickers, people go on Tinder for a while, delete their profile, go back on a year later.
- Concealed: The Experience Machine is a device you consciously enter, and the trade of privacy for convenience is explicit: you feel it as the neuron belt wraps around your skull and begins probing the recesses of your mind. By contrast, the privacy cost of the convenience offered by big data platforms is hidden from us, and hidden by us. It's hidden *from* us because many platforms (Tinder, Facebook, WhatsApp, and similar) let you get started by checking a box confirming that you've agreed to the terms of use. Those terms include an agreement to privacy invasion, which is normally hidden beneath countless paragraphs of legal jargon. Next, the privacy cost is hidden *by* us in the sense that most of the time we don't want to know. We check the box and start swiping on Tinder, and it's easier to just not think about the possibility of our profile ending up exposed at *Tinder: Live*, or sold to a databroker.

5.4 Zero point: mind, body, pleasure

It's natural to associate our identity—who we are—with our mind. Similarly, the pleasures of convenience—what we feel—connect with our body. Our mind decides who we want to be, and our body enjoys or suffers the consequences. That's exactly how Tinder works.

At the zero point, however, one of the polarities reverses. In order to perfect convenience, the human body needs to be excised, the raw physical part has to be eliminated from the

experience of ourselves. How else will we eliminate the inconvenient details of biological life: shaving in the morning, a sore back at night?

Of course the body lives on inside our imagination and consciousness: if what we ultimately want is pleasure, we need a place to feel. It's just that the sensations are artificial. So, pleasure's purification requires the physical body's elimination. What remains is bodiless existence: we live on as a floating brain hooked up to electrodes. Sometimes this is called a brain in the vat scenario, but no matter the name, this extreme living condition creates an identity conversion: *who I am* becomes convenience. What it means to *be* me is the pure sensations wired to the cerebral source of my reality.

Deriving from that reality there's a strange communal possibility for my identity. If I am nothing more or less than the sensations wired through a brain, then any other brain electrified to feel the same way *is me* too. It's not a twin or a close resemblance, it's the same me, repeated. At the zero point, consequently, we are pure empathy. When we feel what we do (as a receptive brain instead of creating the feeling by physically doing something outside the machine and with our own body), we are also all those others who are feeling the same way.

Again here, identity as something individual and unique evaporates as convenience floods reality.

5.5 Philosophy, identity and the docility of convenience

In his essay *What is Enlightenment?*[20] Immanuel Kant warned that convenience could produce laziness. He didn't mean physical indolence so much as personal docility. When life is too easy, people default toward taking things as they come; they drop into ruts, follow along, let their decisions be made for them. Every time that happens, Kant worried, a bit of personal initiative—and therefore personal identity—gets lost. For example, in Nozick's Experience Machine, the worry is concretized when you choose to live *someone else's* fantasies instead of your own. Or, more realistically, the worry is concretized on Tinder when you don't create your own profile, instead, you go to a webpage that reveals exactly what kind of images you should submit, and which words you should write, to lure the most match requests.[21]

In the early twentieth century, Martin Heidegger found his own way to the conclusion that convenience can have an inverse relation with individuality. On one end of the relation, maximum convenience allows us to blissfully skate through our days without stopping to consider what the purpose of the hours may be, why it is I'm choosing to do one thing instead of something else. He called this "busyness."[22] On the other end of the relation, the *breakdown* of convenience has a *positive* power: being challenged by the world is part of what lets each of us discover and create who we are as authentically unique individuals. To explain, take a convenience, like a dishwasher. You only truly

understand what the machine *is* when it breaks (because you're forced to handwash the dishes). There's something of that in human character too, you tend to discover a person's deeper traits when some part of their existence is disrupted, broken, made *in*convenient.

So, there's an established history in philosophy that stands behind this idea: inconvenience may be *beneficial* in the sense that it forces people to flesh out the distinctive lines of their own unique identity.

5.6 The narcotics shortcut to perfect convenience

The theoretical route to understanding convenience at the extreme is the Experience Machine (or the brain in the vat), where science fiction biology melds with pleasures and experiences filtered to perfection by data algorithms. In these thought experiments, the headwrap and the electrodes meld with personalized tunings of artificial joy, romance, danger, intrigue, sophistication, and excitement.

There is, however, a more realistic way to at least approximate pure convenience: the opium den. Or the Harvard psilocybin experiments,[23] or any of myriad scenes where people give up control over themselves in exchange for the suffusions of pleasure that serious drugs offer.

Critically, there are two streams of convenience running through opium-degree narcotics. One is easy pleasure, and the second goes further. Powerfully addictive drugs simplify the lives of their users by also *providing what it is that they want*. With addiction, convenience reaches the purity that philosophers speculate about inside the Experience Machine: you no longer have to labor to be happy (once you have the drugs), and you no longer have to labor to know what you want to be happy. Effort approaches zero: your wants are satisfied, and then *what* you want—your own desire—is also provided.

Of course comparing opium dens with big data convenience comes with significant limitations, but it does provide a quick route to a simple decision. *Is it worth sacrificing your individual initiative along with the intimacy of your private efforts and desires, for swelling pleasures absorbed almost without effort?*

Every major city has a street or two where opioid addicts gather and buy more. Frequently dirty, sometimes nearly toothless, they come close to incarnating a brain in the vat reality, one where the body, dignity, and individual freedom are exchanged for facile bliss.

People driving past on their way to work spy out their car windows, and recoil in disgust. It's also true, though, that the same men and women who reject the ecstasy of the addicts

will labor for eight hours to pay for the beer or the wine that provides only a hint of the nirvana that the users embrace.

Looking at the scene objectively and from the outside, it's difficult to be confident about whether it's better to be someone who pursues pleasure, or to be a no one who, at least periodically, evaporates into it.

5.7 Arguments in favor of convenience

When privacy and identity are set against convenience, those who stand on convenience's side muster powerful arguments. The most reassuring is that the reasoning underneath the dilemma is fundamentally wrong: *convenience doesn't necessarily hinder the creation of individuality*. It may change the *way* we define ourselves, but that's just a task in innovation for the next, electrified generation to undertake. Along one exploratory line or another, privacy vulnerabilities will be overcome as new forms of identity protection and creation are pioneered. Further, *every* generation encounters unprecedented realities, and only defeatists or Luddites would constrain technological advances over fear of incommensurability to the accompanying challenges.

Another response to worries about big data overwhelming personal identity is blunt: *So what?* The pleasures convenience yields are worth the sacrifice of privacy and personal identity. In other words, if we really got the chance to enter the Experience Machine, then of course we would take it. We're all trying to get that with our lives anyway: to make ourselves into creatures that are happy and feel good. So, if there's a shortcut—whether it's a science fiction device, or Tinder that sets us up romantically, or a Spotify subscription that always knows the right song, or a Wine Library membership that regularly delivers a bottle that we're convinced we want—then we should trade in our personal details, and even our personhood. When you take everything into consideration, it's just worth it.

5.8 Debate summary: Privacy and identity versus convenience

The fundamental philosophical and ethical worry about rampant big data convenience is that individual identity is falling under serious pressure from easy enjoyments.

- We are yielding control over our own identities by surrendering our private information for big data conveniences. The *neutered identity* argument, along with the *feedback loop/identity prison* argument, insist that personal initiative atrophies as our wants get channeled through our exposed individual details.
- We are allowing ourselves to be defined by the machinations of big data operations. Not only are our wants satisfied, we no longer need to do the work of figuring out what our wants are. They are *provided* by the algorithms. Personal effort drops toward zero.

At the extreme, convenience *usurps* personality. It's no longer individuals trying to be who we are with less effort, instead, what it means to be each of us is nothing more than effortlessness.

The response from the convenience side is that it's agreeable—it's pleasurable—to get what you want almost before you ask. More, the *reason* we protect privacy, and the *reason* we want to have personal initiative is to help us get convenient pleasure. So, if we can get the pleasure, then we should. And we should, even if that means:

- giving up on traditional concepts of privacy and personal identity, and pioneering new ones.
- giving up on privacy and personal identity altogether because the pleasure is worth it.

6
Responding to the Big Data Identity Threat: Post Big Data Privacy & Rhizome Selves

Big data conveniences invade users' privacy by taking their personal information. Then they threaten the users' with an identity prison: in small ways and large, we are lured and coerced to actually be the person defined by our accumulated big data profile. Eventually, what we want to buy, and where we decide to go, and what we choose to do may all stimulated for us, and to accord with habits and desires already established and organized on remote databases.

There are three responses.

One is surrender. In 1999, Sun Microsystems CEO Scott McNealy notoriously asserted, "You have zero privacy anyway. Get over it."[24]

The second is reclusive: protect privacy and control over identity by avoiding the conveniences of the data gatherers. If you don't buy from Amazon, refuse to hail an Uber, never consult WebMD, travel without Airbnb, and fail to set up a Facebook account, the algorithms won't churn out reliable profiles of your tastes, habits, debilities, travels, and relationships. For internet surfing, it's best to use a virtual private network, or TOR. For cell phone service, a burner will do. When brick-and-mortar purchasing, use cash. In general, the guiding verb is *to hide*: do what's necessary to shield your private information.

The third response to big data's privacy threat is dynamic: accept big data conveniences, but also create new conceptions of intimacy and individuality that are equipped to subsist within the transparent environment of algorithmic capitalism. The idea here is to rethink

what privacy means, and also how we generate conceptions of ourselves, so that we can retain control over our information and autonomy, even while submitting (at least partially) to the invasion of the data platforms. This is the response we will consider here.

6.1 Rhizome-identity

A rhizome is a plant stem with a particular characteristic: when it's severed, each segment continues growing independently. Moving the idea over to human identity, the idea is that it's a natural part of existence, not an unnatural aberration, to at least periodically break clean away from the person we have been, and grow in a different direction. This dissociation from our own past means we fundamentally reform our tastes, our aspirations and desires. What *drives* us changes. And if the changes run deep enough, then the information the data platforms have accumulated to describe, predict, and lure us is deactivated: the data no longer describes the person we are.

When you live as a rhizome-identity, you protect your privacy and control your own identity not by hiding your personal information, but by escaping it. Instead of concealing information about where you've been and protecting details about what you enjoy and despise, you cut away your past identity and become someone else.

This strategy of recovering privacy and identity by changing who we are isn't for the faint-hearted, but it's not prohibitively perilous or fantastically rare either. It happens every summer that young people depart for a backpacking travel somewhere in the world and soon discover that they can more or less create themselves as whoever they wish for the strangers they meet. Of course, the fact that no one is running background checks on their fellow night-train travelers doesn't automatically convert everyone into vivid explorers of experiences they wouldn't engage were their friends or parents watching, but, every time a generation goes abroad, there's always a few who go native, or meet someone and go somewhere else where they may live a different language, or distinct kind of life. Whatever the particulars, they never go back: not to where they're from, not to who they were. A maximum example would be the late nineteenth-century voyager Isabelle Eberhardt, but if you visit the travel section of your local bookstore, you'll find volumes of narratives written by people you've never heard of, all telling the same story about becoming someone else abroad.

Traveling somewhere else and going native doesn't happen to everyone, but anyone who steps back and observes will begin noticing semi-radical versions of that transformation all around. There's the Wall Street shark who gives up the suits and Adderall and starts a surf camp,[25] the journalist who trades an electric and connected life for an ice cream stand in a country she's never visited.[26] There's the criminal who becomes a cop,[27] and the other criminal who becomes a heroin addict. The football player converts into a priest,[28] the ladies' man comes out of the closet, the reckless and free daughter has her

own child. Every time one of these metamorphoses occurs, there's an escape from big data oppression: the collected information—the past—no longer applies.

6.2 Rhizome theory

The term rhizome as applied to a lifestyle traces back to the late twentieth-century philosopher Gilles Deleuze.[29] Other scholarly connections lead through psychological studies of dissociative identity.[30] Regardless, there are two theoretical keys to the kinds of transformations that lead escapes from the big data identity prison.

- Privacy is something we create, not something we preserve.
- Identity is located in the future not the past, because it begins with verbs not nouns.

The idea of privacy as something created instead of preserved or hidden, means that our defining personal traits, numbers, orientations, and impulses are not dragging along behind us, instead, they're generated. Religious belief, for example, is a critical and personal element of a data profile, and every time someone converts to a new faith, they're *constructing* privacy information. That's what the French writer Isabelle Eberhardt did when she converted to Islam. More contemporaneously (and polemically), there's the case of Yvonne Ridley who also produced her own privacy on the level of faith.

It's not just religious conversions, when a Wall Street banker checks out and heads to the Caribbean to teach surfing, that's not only a change in the weather but a switch in basic values. The question about what's *worth having* and what's *worth doing* with the only life we'll ever have is coming back with different answers.

On the most tangible level of privacy, there's our biological information. Some of that cannot be escaped (genetic traits, future vulnerabilities related to past injuries), but other aspects can be produced. There are the psychological and physical conversions that come with exercise and diet changes, or with drugs and surgery. Even tattoos, piercings, and similar body modifications may reformulate the delicate and intimate elements defining who we are.

Finally, whether the area of personal information corresponds with faith, aspirations, or physical conditions, the idea here is that privacy can be maintained not by hiding personal information, but by constantly producing it. The choice is between keeping personal secrets, and rendering them invalid.

6.3 Rhizome theory: Identity located in the future not the past, beginning with verbs not nouns

In terms of time, there are two ways to understand where my identity—who I am—comes from. One starts from the past, the other begins in the future. The difference can be conceived grammatically, in terms of nouns and verbs.

When my identity traces to the past, we say that there is someone who I am, and then because of that, I do what I do. For example, I may be a person who regularly emails friends in Mexico. Because that network is part of who I am (the noun), you can expect that what I do (the verbs) will follow along afterward. It shouldn't be surprising, consequently, to find that I'm the kind of person who'd be particularly tempted by the opportunity to visit the country. What's certain is that big data platforms work on this logic: they find out who you are by scanning your emails, and then use the gathered data to predict—and profit from—what you might subsequently do. This is the Google business model. It's also why I constantly get served online ads for Cancún airfares and hotel deals.

Identity can also be conceived the other way, however. I do what I do, and the person I am comes after, as an *effect* of what has been done. In other words, to know who I am, you first need to see my behavior. If that's the order—if it's the verb of *what is done* before the noun of *who I am*—then the full definition of what it means to be me is always just over the horizon: we're always waiting for it to come after witnessing the latest act.

Examples of this logic of identity are common. For instance, we say that we *fall* in love because we don't know beforehand who we're going to find enchanting. It's only because I'm falling for someone, that I become the person who loves. The verb comes before the noun; you love before you are identified as the one who loves.

Or again, no one drinks to excess because they're an alcoholic; they become an alcoholic because they've been drinking, excessively.

Across experience the logic repeats. Many young adults have little sense of the career they'd like for themselves. For some the uncertainty never ends, but others happen into a profession and acquire the taste. Maybe a woman studies theoretical mathematics in college, but finds the work too abstract until stumbling into a job at Tableau where number avalanches get applied visually: by doing it, she learns that she's a mathematical engineer. Or, maybe someone who starts out playing on the college soccer team acquires a taste for the regimens of training and diet, and so becomes a trainer or dietician. Or, there's the aspiring actress who works part time as a waitress before becoming a fulltime waitress before taking the leap, buying her own establishment, and so becomes a restaurateur. The paths are infinite, but every one is the same in this way: what you do becomes who you are. The verbs come before the nouns and the I—as in who I am—is always just out of reach in the future because we won't know for sure exactly what it is until we've already stopped doing things, which is a fatal condition.

6.4 Big data, privacy, and rhizome-identity

Big data relates to privacy and identity in two ways. One is oppressive, the other enabling.

Big data platforms oppress when they claw for private information and exploit it to confine users. Your identity becomes inescapable when every romantic partner you meet, every film you see, and every trip you take is filtered and proffered to correspond with a data profile accumulated from your own past and stored underneath a cooling tower thousands of miles away. Every new person and experience resembles the last one. In the end, this is the deepest ethical risk of big data reality: collapsing privacy leading to withered individuality.

But there's another side to the same technology and facility. Just as it's true that it has never been easier to get trapped in a single identity, so too it has never been easier to *get out* of who we are, to disrupt our existences from the bottom up by connecting with unfamiliar aspirations, tastes, desires, and directions. The wealth of our society grants nearly everyone the opportunity to take time away from the simple grind to survive, travel has never been easier, the information flows that trap us all in our customs and habits also provide narrow windows onto completely unexpected experiences. Just taking the simplest example of shared realties that is YouTube, it's undeniable that you need to reel through a punishing number of cat videos to find something interesting, but despite that there are curious destinies out there. Or, take LinkedIn: only a decade ago the job search for the young was more or less limited to the advertisements found in the local newspaper, plus the doors that could be knocked on around town. Now, accessible openings feed to our screens on an international scale, and for those who make a resonant appeal to the recruiter who's willing to take a chance, they can be gone the next day.

6.5 Ethical tasks of the big data privacy invasion

The two resisting responses to big data's privacy invasion imply distinct ethical tasks.

If hiding is the strategy, then the central ethical task is to help people protect their information. This leads to the incipient movement in *privacy by design*. The idea here is to initiate projects with data protection prioritized: from the first page of the designing and programming, steps will be taken to ensure that users' information remains secure, instead of escaping into the hands of freewheeling databrokers. It's difficult to object to these kinds of public interest initiatives, but it's even harder not to recognize that the money is on the data gathering side, which means the wildcatters prying the data out are going to be getting better rewards than the technicians assigned to keep it safe. The consequences of the imbalance are not difficult to foresee.

If escape is the strategy, then the ethical task assigned by big data reality isn't to design privacy in, it's to design monotony out; it is to ensure that everyone is tempted not by the sure thing, but by the unexpected, the idiosyncratic, the weird. At least initially, the

economics don't line up well for this strategy, either. After investing rivers of money in the attempt to identify exactly who their users are, it's difficult to imagine why data platforms would then respond by feeding back content (romantic partners on Tinder, product suggestions on Amazon, career opportunities on LinkedIn) that's *not* suited to the recipient.

It is standard practice on some platforms to intentionally introduce anomalies from time to time, to test how users respond to possibilities that they wouldn't otherwise be served.[31] So Tinder may present a man who loves jazz to the woman whose ears still ring from last night's metal concert. But, even here, the *reason* for including incongruent experiences is not to provide opportunities for the users to escape their profile, it is to refine the ability to define the users still further, to hold them still tighter, and to predict matches still more accurately.

END

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