Playing with Paradoxes

Identity in the web era

Spelen met paradoxen
Identiteit in het tijdperk van het web

Proefschrift

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by *Botgirl*. See for the original: http://botgirl.blogspot.com/

Botgirl is a 'thought experiment personified through a self-aware AI, incarnating as a part-time Second Life avatar'.

Sie wollen Würfel spielen mit den kleinsten Würfelchen oder tanzen sehn, was schwer zu sehn ist: die Zwerge des Daseins, die lustigen Urkörperchen: aber sie nennen's Wissenschaft und schwitzen dabei. Aber Kinder sind es mir, die ihr Spiel wollen: und wenn etwas Lachen bei ihrem Spiele wäre, so wollte ich ihre 'fröhliche Wissenschaft' gutheissen.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Some are tempted to think of life in cyberspace as insignificant, as escape or meaningless diversion. It is not. Our experiences there are serious play.

Sherry Turkle

For Jiska

Contents

To my fellow players

The majority of games are not played in isolation: either we play *with* other people, or we play *against* them. Often it is both. So too in the game I played during the last five years. Characteristic of the game of science is that the people you work with are both your team mates and your adversaries at the same time: discussing texts and sharing ideas with colleagues means they try to help you by fiercely criticizing your most precious. This game goes by the name 'constructive criticism'.

A couple of those players I want to acknowledge here. First of all, the members of our research group - the *PIGgies*: Jos de Mul, Valerie Frissen, Joost Raessens, Michiel de Lange, Eva Nieuwdorp and Sybille Lammes. (No offence intended - 'PIGgies' is the acronym derived from *P*layful *I*dentity *G*roup…) I thank Jos – my philosophical mentor and promotor – for the effort he put into my thesis. I am particularly grateful for all the *playroom* he allowed me during its composition; in terms of rules, but also physically, by allowing me to have the *playroom* mostly to myself (we shared offices!). I thank my fellow PhD candidate Michiel, with whom I entertain a very friendly relationship since the beginning of the research project, and who motivated me time and time again with his enthousiasm, but who also understood like no one else the trials and tribulations of writing the dissertation. I thank Valerie and Joost for their clever comments on my drafts and all the humour and positive vibes they brought to our monthly meetings.

My cat Sunny needs extra mentioning, for the priceless joy she gave me when playing with imaginary mice, during my countless sessions in front of my computer screen. And last – but certainly not least – I have to thank Jiska, my playmate, without whom I would not have made it to the finishing line. Who came into my life at exactly the right moment and who gave me the positive energy and playful mood I so desperately needed. Who taught me that science is by far not the most important game in life.
I am glad that – for now – it is '*Game over'*.

Jeroen Timmermans
Rotterdam, August 2010.

Prelude

In July 2010 Facebook had more than 400 million active users. 400 million people who on average have 130 digital friends, who create 70 pieces of content each month, and of whom 100 million even access Facebook through their mobile devices.[1] These people share their photos, keep their friends posted on their whereabouts, subscribe to user groups and visit the pages of old school mates. Since its foundation in 2004, Facebook experienced explosive growth and new applications, such as games, mobile features, a gift shop and Facebook Ads were added almost monthly, making it the most important social network site on the web. When asked about their reasons for using Facebook, users mention qualities such as being given a platform to present themselves; to maintain connections with others; to meet new people; to articulate their social networks, or to engage in romantic or professional relationships (Cf. Ellison, Steinfield, Lampe 2007: 1).

On the other hand, Wikipedia offers anyone knowing how to start up a web browser to easily find as much as fifteen different methods – some of them described in their every detail – for committing suicide. On 'suicide-blogs' depressed youngsters share stories, overtly discuss their plans, and ask advice on what pills to use in order to die the quickest.[2] Although at first glance these sites might seem effective ways to offer help and mutual understanding in times of crisis, the result is frequently counter-effective, handing morbid suggestions to already insecure kids and helping them cross the ultimate line. To shockingly quote a 16-year old girl on *zelfmoord.nl*: "Every day we talk through msn and fantasize about what it would be like in Heaven. Two weeks ago we started collecting pills. By now I get them from almost anywhere. From my parents' medical aid kit or from friends. Soon I will have a lethal mix. Then, finally, I shall find peace."

These are all matters of identity. They deal with adolescents asking themselves important questions in the course of their lives: Who do I want to be? What do I want to look like? Where do I want to go with my life? Is there a meaning to my life? How

[1] Source: http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics#!/press/info.php?statistics
[2] See for example: www.zelfmoord.nl ('suicide'.nl)

can I end my problems? Stories such as the ones above indicate how tremendously important the phenomenon of identity has become in our societies: it – literally – is a matter of life and death. Lately, talk of *identity* seems to be everywhere: religious identity clashes lead to acts of terrorism; national governments eat their brains trying to integrate all the different ethnic minorities in their nations into a peaceful and socially viable whole, and our excessive lifestyles are increasingly threatened by the disrupting effects they have on the environment. We discuss our national identities, sexual identities and corporate identities. It appears that everybody either *wants to be* someone, wants to be member of a distinct and respected community, or maybe even *has to be* someone in order to make it in this highly competitive world. Yet, somehow, no one really seems to know how.

Identities forge worlds and write histories.[3] The ideas persons cherish about themselves, about the societies they partake in; collective ideas about moral, the order of state and appropriate behaviour, they all decide how we build our societies, how we deal with one another, and how we prefer to live our lives. Who we are, or at least who we *think* we are, to a large degree shapes how we construct our lives. Now that the web has turned into an all-pervading part of our daily lives and since it has become impossible to imagine a life without it, this urges us to pose the question whether using the world wide web impacts how people conceive of themselves, their place in the world and, consequently, their intentional behaviour?[4] Does visiting web pages alter our body of ideas? Does designing a homepage change its designer's self-conception? Does visiting political or religious forums put our worldview upside-down? How is our moral frame of reference affected by our wanderings through the global matrix we call the *World Wide Web*? Compare it to the massive impact of the first charts of the world and the maritime shipping in the sixteenth century on our worldview, developments that set the pace for the history of visual globalization that culminated into the picture of the earth taken from outer space in the middle of the last century. Thanks to those media, people scattered around the globe became aware of both the fact that they

[3] Obviously, this applies the other way around too!

[4] Although web access is growing rapidly around the globe, in the daily lives of many people on this planet the web plays only a marginal or even completely absent role. Yet, since I write about those people who *do* have access to the web, I will make this disclaimer only once, fully aware of the political and economic restrictions a lot of people still suffer from.

inhabited this *one*, blue planet, and of the implications this has for our collective predicament.

It may be helpful to give another small example to indicate the kind of mentality changes I seek to illuminate. Let us take up a classic: gender issues. Dressing up like a woman was never as easy for males as it is nowadays: you only need signing up for Second Life. Although research has shown that people generally stick rather close to their real life personae, a considerable part of participants in these kind of virtual worlds or role-playing games effectively *do* change their appearance significantly or might even adopt another sex.[5] Of course, there are those players who are already transvestites, for whom virtual reality offers no more than another stage to act out an alternate identity they already desired long before. So nothing new for them. But what about those men who present themselves as women just for the fun of it? Maybe because they think to get some kinky sort of arousal out of it? Is this just harmless play or could there be more to it?

In behavioural psychology it is common knowledge that in order to know herself, a person has to take the roundabout route of studying her conduct, instead of merely engaging in self-complacent introspection, that is, to measure her effect upon others, and infer her own personality from those reflexive self-analyses. Now, suppose an infamous *Don Giovanni* enters Second Life disguised as an attractive woman. After the initial euphoria over his new, lush body and the pleasures that go with it, he notices the unpleasantly high rate of attention he gets from male inhabitants of this second world. They even get so aggressive and obtrusive in their attempts to court our twisted Don Giovanni that he eventually decides to retransform his character into a male to return to a normal (second) life. Could it be that a man is less likely to harass an attractive woman now that he can virtually slip under her skin in cyberspace and get a feeling of what it is like to be hassled all the time?[6] Could it not be the case that he becomes aware of an objectionable kind of behaviour he did not pay attention to before, and alter it accordingly? He may well end up looking at gender issues differently altogether. The same might apply to other topical issues: how we treat foreigners, or how we deal with

[5] For an extensive review of the implications of online gender swapping see: Turkle 1995: 210-32.

[6] Maybe a remark on gender issues, in avoidance of all too critical receptions or even disillusioned readers: since the chosen topic of this book is highly vulnerable to gender issues, I have chosen to opt, if possible, for the grammatical gender of words when using their relative pronouns. So when referring to persons I will consequently refer to them in the female mode. No offence guys.

persons that adhere to deviant religions. The recent plague among young people of so-called *cyber-bullying*, leading to severe discomforts and even mental complaints of adolescents, may serve as another example of how powerful the web[7] can be in influencing personal identity.

Examples as the ones just given do provide us with a strong indication that the web has a bearing on identities, but it has yet to be seen in what precise changes this impact resides. That is what this book is about. Do humans who use the web think differently about themselves and the world compared to how they did before the introduction of this medium? Can we establish a connection between people's changing identities and the introduction of the web in their lives? If we ask them about their identity, do they tell us a different story than they did before? Both the content of self-conceptions, as well as the process by which those are formed and how this affects their content reflexively, will be dealt with. After all, writing an autobiography is a far cry from maintaining a website. To narrow down the above research question and apply more focus to the research, I take French philosopher Paul Ricoeur's theory of *narrative identity* as a vantage point for this exploration into identity. Older, linear media, such as books and letters, invited to the development of the theory of *narrative identity*, which served as a powerful theory to describe identity construction in the pre-digital age. The question is, whether this theory still applies under the condition of the far-going digitalization of our lives?

We have to keep in mind, though, that human identity consists of more than the knowledge that settles in the narratives people consciously tell about themselves. Equally important, if not more on a social plane, is the question whether they behave differently too? An employer who is used to *googling* every applicant without (morally) questioning this procedure any further? Vast parts of our behaviour never even reach the level of conscious self-knowledge unless we practice ourselves in hours of psychoanalysis. The same goes for a lot of our inclinations. For example, several psychological researches have shown how unaware we are of our biases towards other people: close observation learns that non-racist behaviour is virtually impossible, although we may very well faithfully pledge to adhere to a principal of non-discrimination and think to act accordingly (See: Wilson 2002: 189-90). So, by far not

[7] For convenience, I will mainly use 'the web' in the text, instead of 'writing world wide web' in full every time.

all the changes a medium induces make it all the way to our conscious self-image. Yet, as this research is concerned with peoples' explicit, conscious self-conceptions, I restrict myself to a philosophical analysis of web pages and users' overt communication on weblogs and social network sites.

As a medium, or rather *the* medium of our time, the web fulfils several functions in our lives: first and foremost, obviously, it is an ICT; an 'Information and Communication Technlogy'. It spreads information for those who want to send it into the world, and collects information, for those in search of it. The web, though, is not only an instrument for the exchange of information: it is also a medium for the construction and communication of individual (personal) and collective identities. Individual users as well as cultural, ethnic and religious groups increasingly use homepages and weblogs as a means to discuss and master their identities. Equally important for mastering identities is the potential the web offers in terms of self-expression and the reflection on identities, on homepages and weblogs for instance. Next to those 'symbolical' functions, the underlying internet serves – in terms of the infrastructure it provides – many other goals, ranging from storing data (it is by far the world's biggest database), to wiring money and rendering virtual presence possible (skype, videoconferencing, chatting). Not in the least, the web is there for entertainment and doing business, which is by sheer number and revenue its principal *raison d'être*.

From this vast list of usages, the focus in this study is on the web as a means for self-expression and communication, notwithstanding the fact that the other functions play their part too in terms of their impact on users' identity. So, what happens to how people think of themselves and to their ideas on how (social) life should be lived as a consequence of using the web? Therefore, the main focus is on the mental effects of using the world wide web as a tool for self-expression and communication, its impact on peoples' self-conceptions and their moral stands. This book is a philosophical investigation into the medium-specific characteristics of the web in relation to the construction and expression of individual and collective identities. It seeks to answer the question whether use of the web necessitates transforming the theory of narrative identity construction towards a theory of *playful identities*?

As the expressive and reflexive dimensions of the construction of personal and cultural identities are its main focus, the *textual and hermeneutical* description, analysis and interpretation of websites and weblogs are central in this study. This approach is reflected in my style of writing, which – as the reader will soon experience – might be quite unorthodox for a doctoral thesis. I adjusted style to content, in order to narrow the gap between form and content as much as possible. Also, in the light of the subject – identity – I deem it most fruitful to write a text, which is as close to the reader's own experiences as possible. After all, as I stated before, it is not so much how scientists think about what humans are and how their identities are constructed, but rather how humans conceive of themselves that decides about how societies are built and politics is made.[8] Whether human beings *are* free or only *think to act freely*, for example, may be a highly debated and very exciting scientific and philosophical problem, but fact is that in the Western world we built our society upon the supposition that we *are* free and *are* capable of acting rationally. As Kenneth Gergen rightly remarked: "Beliefs about the self seem pivotal to all our undertakings. We believe that as normal human beings we possess reasoning powers, emotions, conscience, intentions; these beliefs are critical to the way we relate to others" (Gergen 1991: VIII). That is why I base my analysis predominantly on the (popular) expressions of identity and people's explicit self-understanding. As a consequence, I draw on qualitative research, the power of which lies in its interpretative strength, not so much in its statistical rigor.

The book has been written according to what could be called a kind of *Hegelian logic*: starting with a rather *abstract*, conceptual analysis I then move on – piece-by-piece – to penetrate the more *concrete* layers of late modern identity and work my way through to the results of the web analyses that have been carried out. Because of the emphasis on the reflexive aspect of identity formation, I apply a philosophical perspective on the matter. The problem of human identity is by its nature a highly philosophical one. Since its genesis it bears the traces of the great thinkers of the past: Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, Kant, and many more. They still provide the conceptual basis of current research on identity and force us, by their profound insights, into dialogue with

[8] It goes without saying that scientific insights in some cases *do* influence public opinion, be it sometimes long after they have been established. Think for example of the impact Enlightenment philosophers had on our modern discourse of freedom or Darwin's theory had on now common ways of reasoning in matters concerning nature.

them. An example of the influence historic ideas can have on current opinions is that many Westerners nowadays share the Romantic idea that somewhere deep concealed in them there is a metal box containing their true identity, turning their lives into the quest of the proper key to open this magic box and discover who they really are. Although this view is widely disputed within the scientific community, it still lies at the heart of a powerful discourse with tremendous societal implications. In chapter 3 I return to this issue.

That is why the first part of the book addresses the problem of (human) identity in its bare form. What *is* (human) identity? What are we actually talking about here? Because the concept of identity is used in numerous discourses – be it psychological, sociological, legal or any other – there is little consensus on its meaning and precise definitions are often lacking. Therefore, part one of the thesis seeks to clarify the highly ambiguous and enigmatic concept of identity, and it offers a discussion of what I deem its most significant aspects. The focus in the *first chapter* is on the *what* of identity: what is 'identity'? What phenomenon do we refer to when we use the word *identity*? In addition, a philosophical exploration on the main issues that circulate in the debate on human identity is performed. It comprises an analysis of identity-related concepts such as subjectivity, selfhood, narrativity, the mind-body relationship, memory, character, personal identity and self-identity, and ecological and reflexive self-awareness, leading up to a definition of how I understand human identity in this book.

In *chapter 2* attention is directed to the *how* of human identity; to the manner in which identities are constructed. How do people form their self-conceptions? What psychological, linguistic and sociological tools are used to get to an outspoken self-image? Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity, which – as I declared above – serves as the vantage point of this research, will receive extended commentary in this chapter. In the *third chapter,* then, I look deeper into the *content* of current Western self-conceptions. Here, I will also take into account the role media played in the building of our identity. What are the responses people give to the question of who they think they are? Where do these self-descriptions come from? Why is it that identity is such a 'big issue' these days? What are the main elements of our self-descriptions and where do they (historically) stem from?

On the basis of this introduction to the phenomenon of identity, I elaborate on the paradoxes that beset modern conceptions of identity. The analysis leads to the

conclusion that three major paradoxes lie at the heart of the modern, western narrative on personal identity: 1) There is the apprehension, stemming from the Enlightenment, of human beings as self-conscious, rational and autonomous creatures, contested by the Romantic view of humans as being driven by (often unconscious) moods, feelings and incentives, resisting conscious control. 2) Nowadays we seem to be split, more than ever, between the (selfish) wish for self-expression and personal growth on the one, and the need for communication and community on the other hand. The world wide web – with its tendency of encapsulating and uniting people at the same time – is a paradigmatic playground for this tension in the modern moral. 3) For one we believe in the idea of a fixed, stable personality, hidden somewhere in the depth of our soul. On a daily basis it is even unimaginable not to suppose some sort of 'core personality' that pervades all social roles we play. Human interaction would become impossible altogether if we were to lose the ability to predict the behaviour of others to a certain degree. On the other hand, however, there is growing awareness of the deep impact of environments on human conduct and people's perception of situations and the subsequent changeability of identities that goes with it. Both in psychological and sociological studies the evidence for how little we are in control of our own actions mounts up (Cf. Wilson 2002: 43-66). Identity then becomes a highly flexible composite of the social activities we engage in and their influence on how we feel, act and judge, without supposing some sort of core identity behind all the social faces we pull.[9]

In the second part of the thesis, I use this analysis of human identity as a stepping stone for the discussion and understanding of online identity practices. In preparation of the main argument, in *part two* I move on to the other grand theme of this study: playfulness. It may come as a surprise to the reader to encounter an explanation of playfulness no earlier than after some hundred of pages into the thesis. I purposely put it there, as to put extra emphasis on the new route that was turned onto when digital media hit the road, which is reflected in the composition of the thesis itself.

[9] A paradox is a thing that has two opposite features, and therefore seems in conflict with itself. Under closer inspection, though, both poles of the opposition turn out to be true. In this case, I will demonstrate that the internal conflicts pertaining to Western identities, in part stem form the same, underlying media developments. In order to avoid an overkill of the term *paradox* in this thesis, I sometimes use familiar – though not equivalent – terms such as tension, opposition, ambivalence, conflict, etcetera. I ask the reader to keep the paradoxical nature of the phenomena I describe in mind.

Chapter 4 aims at shedding light on the concepts of *play*, *game* and *playfulness*, as well as on serving as a bridge between the first part on identity in general and the second part on web identity. It sets the stage for the understanding of how identities can be understood as *playful*. We will see that human identity can be called *playful*, 1) insofar as it is constructed in the tension between social, technological and commercial determination on the one, and creative-autonomous appropriation of media and self-expression on the other hand. In the English language this distinction is aptly expressed by the familiar concepts of 'game' and 'play'; 2) insofar as playfulness expresses the tension between individual and collective behaviour; 3) insofar as playfulness points at the 'playing' with and experimenting with reality; by doing this, I am in a position to grasp the complex, antagonistic phenomenon of identity in two, powerful concepts; and 4), insofar as playfulness points at the 'as-if' character, and the frivolity that are characteristic of web practices.

The final three chapters, then, focus on instances of playfulness in the realm of the world wide web. At first glance, writing about 'playful identities' may seem somewhat far-fetched altogether. What do the phenomena of play and human identity have in common? Yet, on further inspection a wealth of possible connections between the two of them opens up. Let me mention just a couple of the (non-digital) areas where play and identity meet. For starters, we all know the importance of games and play-like behaviour in raising children: games are important educational tools, they help with developing social skills, they contribute to the shaping of the body, and they can have a big effect on children's self-consciousness. As human beings develop an identity over the course of their youth, games and playful situations frequently cross their path. But also after adulthood has been reached, playfulness remains a pervasive feature of human life, such as in the playing of social roles or religious rituals. Also consider the importance of hobbies or other 'passions' in people's lives, which can have tremendous importance for their sense of identity. One could ask whether it is possible to investigate identity without considering playing at all? As will be shown down the path of this investigation, the entangling of identities and instances of playfulness becomes even stronger when we add the world wide web to the equation.

In fact, in response to the question about the relationship between media and identity, as posed earlier in this introduction, the principal thesis I advocate in this book is that there are sound grounds to conceive of identities in our age of digital media as *playful*

identities. The concept of playfulness adequately links the fundamental paradoxes of late modern identity, as I briefly explained them above, to the ambivalences that were introduced by using the world wide web as a source of meaning, information, self-expression and communication. We could summarize the process of identity formation in the present age of digital media as a continuous oscillation between the opposite poles of personal autonomy and techno-economic determinism; between individuality and collectivity; between the local and the global; and between being and appearance. Now, the playfulness of modern, online identity resides in three ambivalences of play in particular: autonomy and heteronomy, individuality and collectivity, reality and appearance, as I explain in chapter 4.

In *chapter 5* I present the central case of this thesis. Via an analysis of social movements, politically orientated sites and eco-weblogs, it will be shown, how playful presentation of statements, jokes, humour and satire serve as a medium for producing critical and subversive messages and facilitate resistance against (social, economic and political) systems. I describe so-called 'green blogs' at length, which allow for an apt example of how all the mentioned aspects of playfulness merge in an online environment. Aspects of play as freedom, as well as those of frivolity, open(minded)ness and counter-culture are prominent features of those kind of websites.

On the basis of the case about green blogs, in chapter 6, the ambivalences of play will be coupled with the aforementioned identity paradoxes, and will be explored in the realm of the world wide web. The first one is the tension caused by the freedom of play(ers) on the one hand, and the heteronomy and rule-bound character of game-like situations on the other. We can summarize this aspect of playful identities as *playing with rules*.

I then elaborate on the second ambivalence – *playing with others* – consisting of a peculiar mix of individual interests and collective behaviour, which I observe in the playfulness of social network sites. I tentatively explore the ramifications of the world wide web as a social medium, in which playful, light, frivolous self-presentation of people seems a way of covering up the utter seriousness of social bonding and the pressure underneath the social process. On the web we are more than ever caught between the two tendencies of individualization and capsularization on the one, and communication and community building on the other hand. The web is both a source of reflexive uncertainty and computer-mediated isolation, and serves as a new, high-tech

layer of social cement. The focus here is on social network sites and the paradox they create between being alone in front of a computer screen and talking to the world at the same time. Also coming to the fore in this context is the tension between living in a highly mediated, *globalized* world and the construction, expression and experience of *personal* and local identities.

Also in chapter 6, the third ambivalence expresses the tension between play as creating a world of appearance, a kind of second, experimental reality, and 'normal' reality. In this case of *playing with reality* there is a direct connection of online behaviour and personal identity. In online environments we witness playful probing of identities and the discovery of alternative stances and new ideas, but all of this has very real consequences. A playful environment encourages us to do 'as if', to pretend, and to take on roles beyond the ordinary. This role-playing can become so strong an experience as to forget what the 'real' world is or to import characteristics into it. The gap between reality and appearance closes. I will look into the implications for human identity of online identity experiments and the possibility for people to 'play with themselves'. As opposed to narrative theories on identity, the concept of playfulness emphasises the open and multilinear character of identity, just like a game virtually has an endless number of possible variants and outcomes. Like the way games are played over and over again, human identities remain under construction over the course of a life. And just like life, games have a high degree of uncertainty (about the outcome) attached to them: their course cannot be pre-determined. Play always contains an element of make-believe: it is accompanied by an awareness of a second reality as opposed to real life. When playing we seem to engage in our 'second lives': we shift between the worlds of being and appearance.

At the end of the sixth chapter and in the final chapter then, I return to Paul Ricoeur's theory of *narrative identity*, and suggest the concept of *playful identity*, not so much as a critique, but rather as an extension of his theory in the light of new media developments. Because it offers more space to incorporate web-specific elements like multimediality, interactivity and virtuality than the theory of narrative identity does, I argue that the theory of playful identities provides us with a better toolkit to understand today's identity. The main goal of this undertaking is to achieve a better *understanding* of what it means to live a human life in times of global, digital media. The conclusion will be reached that in order to fully grasp the web's impact on users' identities, we

have no choice but to extend the theory of narrative identity towards a theory of *playful identities*.

The sheer speed of technological innovation turns any analysis of it into a perilous undertaking. Any academic study of social change runs the substantial risk of investigating the impacts of a technology that has already been replaced by its successor the moment the results are published. The researcher's plight gets even trickier if he happens to be a philosopher, who, by nature of his discipline, is always too late for history. How can someone whose insights do not sprout before dawn contribute to a field as fast-moving and capricious as that of new media?

Well, the book you hold in your hands right now hopefully shows that it can de done. And it is by far not the only one on the topic. The number of publications on media alone indicate that there obviously is still something important to say for us philosophers, even though we might sometimes seem like nothing but an unworldly bunch of conceptualizing dinosaurs from a distant, classical age, a bit blown away by the wondrous technical achievements of modernity. Actually, it is precisely because of the reason just mentioned that there is so much value in a philosopher's contribution to the fast-growing field of media theory: not a single technological innovation in history stood by itself or came out of the blue, but always was, and will always be, a product of its socio-cultural surroundings. Therefore, it is inevitable to study the history of man and his ideas in order to understand our current psycho-technological predicament. It is this what philosophers do. In this case, being late turns out to be a virtue.

Part 1

Identity

Chapter 1
Who am I ?

1.1 The question after identity

> We try to work out who strangers are even when merely observing them. We work at presenting ourselves so that others will workout who we are along the lines that we wish them to. We wonder whether so-and-so is doing *that* because of their identity.
>
> And we talk. We talk about whether people are born gay or become gay because of their upbringing. About what it means to be 'grown up'. About the difference between the English and the Scots. About the family who have just moved in round the corner: we shake our heads, what can you expect, they're from the wrong part of town? About 'Arabs', 'Mulisms', 'rag heads' and 'terrorists'. We talk about identity all the time (although we may not always use the word itself).
>
> *Richard Jenkins*

Have you ever dreamed of being someone else? As most of us you probably have. Maybe you imagined yourself being an influential and loaded CEO, driving a fancy sportscar outside your Beverly Hills villa. Or you pondered upon what it would be like to impersonate the president of the United States. Or you may have fantasized, during one of your ordinary days at the office, about adopting an extremely outgoing character and turning into an extraordinary Casanova, in thrilling conquest of sensual paradise. Or maybe you, quite the opposite, pictured yourself as being one of the great thinkers of the past and wondered what it would be like to have the all-encompassing mind of Immanuel Kant, or the outrageous genius of Friedrich Nietzsche.

But is this still you? Who exactly is transforming into someone else? What would it take for you to become, say, Brad Pitt, or Beyoncé, and stay yourself at the same time? Obviously, in all these instances some hybrid creature is likely to emerge from the desired transformations, that simultaneously turns into another and will still always be

the same. The paradoxical – and for some perhaps desillusional – truth of these kind of fictitious personality swaps lies in the fact that one cannot think of anyone but *oneself* undergoing those changes. It is sheer impossible to conceive of any perspective on one's identity different than *one's own*. For if not so, it would no longer be *you* turning into Brad Pitt. 'You' would simply cease to exist, which causes the experiment to lose its purpose altogether.

Although these kind of examples of swapping identities seem restricted to the world of (science) fiction for the moment, they are less surreal than one might think. We are all subjected to profound transformations on a daily basis, even if we may not be aware of it. The molecular changes our organisms undergo within a 24-hour time-span roughly amount to somewhere into the region of billions. Nonetheless, when waking up in the morning there will not be a glimmer of doubt in your mind whether it is still *you* reluctantly dragging *yourself* out of bed towards a revitalising shower. This experience of staying the same human being goes on – providing circumstances of 'normal' health – throughout our lives. A person may call into question every aspect of her life, and repeatedly alter her looks, profession, whereabouts, religion and anything else she likes, but somewhere deep down the unshakeable knowledge of remaining the same human being at all times and in all places persists. This first-person experience of identity ultimately constitutes the bedrock of human identity.

As far as we know, an animal does not have a sense of selfhood the way humans do, that is, it will not wake up in the morning thinking 'hey, it's still me jumping around in this forest'. Human beings do not just 'endure' as bodies in time, but they also 'perdure' their existence. That is, they hold a reflective attitude towards their being in time, and they are existentially concerned for their own being (Cf. Noonan 2003: 100, Heidegger 1993: 191-200).[10] Without a minimal amount of reflection there would be no experience of self-identity whatsoever, hence relegating humans to the consciousness level of animals.

[10] We have to keep in mind here that it is a thin and meandering line between the human and the animal reign. Higher species such as primates, dolphines and elephants are known to have some rudimentary form of self-awareness as well.

1.1.1 Self-identity and personal identity

Following Godfrey Vesey (1974) I shall designate this elementary form of self-awareness our *self-identity*. Self-identity comprises our 'basic, primary, fundamental and radical' sense of identity, complementing our so-called *personal identity*. Personal identity on the other hand constitutes a 'subsidiary, secondary' layer of identity containing the symbolic mediations we tend to use to give a satisfactory description of ourselves (Cf. Vesey 1974: 32). Another way of explaining these different *modi essendi* of human identity would be by viewing them as a *primary* and a *secondary reflection* on identity. It goes without saying that even the elementary experience of self-identity presupposes a reflexive stance, just as the subsidiary personal identity does[11]. A person needs a minimal amount of reflective distance towards herself in order to perceive of herself – even if this comes down to a mere, nonconceptual experience of selfhood – as being the same organism in different times and places. For there to be *identity* – that is a sense of something *staying the same* over time - one has to make a diachronical comparison, relying on the capacity of memory, which presupposes 'objectifying' oneself in some sort of way.[12] Even without consciously thinking 'here I am' all the time, I hold the firm belief, without any doubt, that it is *me* living here and now.

As Dan Zahavi states convincingly in *Subjectivity and selfhood*: "Self-consciousness is not merely something that comes about the moment one scrutinizes one's experiences attentively (let alone something that only comes about the moment one recognises one's own mirror image, refers to oneself using the first-person pronoun, or is in possession of identifying knowledge of one's own life story). […] In its most primitive and fundamental form, self-consciousness is taken to be a question of having

[11] The reader will come across the words 'reflexion' and 'reflection' on countless occasions. The difference between them, as I use them, is that whereas 'reflection' means thinking about something (which can be oneself but also something else) - so, it refers to our capacity of thinking - 'reflexion' always implies that someone is thinking about herself.

[12] It is debatable whether the use of personal pronouns is necessary in order to have this basic experience of self-identity. I am inclined to think that reflectivity does not imply using a pronoun. I do not have to be engaged in an active thinking of myself in terms of an 'I' for intuitively knowing that I've stayed the same human being, for retaining the same first-person perspective.

first-personal access to one's own consciousness; it is a question of the first-personal givenness or manifestation of experiential life" (Zahavi 2005: 15).[13]

The secondary reflection on who we are leads us into the realm of our social, symbolically mediated identity, generally going by the name of *personal identity*. Humans typically set out on an introspective quest for discovering the different aspects of their identity, revealing the traits that turn them into themselves and distinguish them from others. We then not only become conscious of ourselves qua selves, which happens on the level of self-identity already, but we give this sense of selfhood flesh and bones by expressing[14] our very personal identity.

For now, let us take a first, preliminary look into the self-designating tools people use in order to depict themselves. What are the categories people rely upon in speaking about themselves when being asked for their identity? You would probably get an answer somewhat like this: "Hi, I'm Theresa, I live in Boston, Massachusetts. I'm a tall, blond woman aged 33 and work as a public relations officer. I adhere to no particular religion and I'm married to my husband Michael. People always say I have a nice and warm personality and when I'm not working I play tennis or hang out with friends. Besides that, I love travelling." This is supposedly the standard pattern of self-referentiality Westerners apply when thinking about themselves or expressing their presumed identity to others. From this example we can deduce a couple of general things.

First of all, we see people in the process of self-identification referring to hard, relatively unchanging *body* features, such as their gender, figure, characteristic marks, their ethnicity, age, and so forth. *Secondly,* an important constituting factor in the palette we use to draw the picture of ourselves are *psychological* dispositions involving our desires, inclinations, temper, moods, character traits, memories and likes and dislikes. *Thirdly*, there is a significant reference to *biographical facts* like our name, address, profession, life's history, circle of friends, family, hobbies, place of birth and the like. These first three levels of self-description make up our so-called *forensic* identity, referring to our being recognisable to others as a *particular human being*, our

[13] Sahavi does not discriminate between self-awareness and self-consciousness, which I will do in this chapter.

[14] This may be an autodialogue. We don not necessarily have to express it to others, self-reflection suffices here. Also, other modes than language exist to express identities. E.g. clothing, behaviour, participation in social networks.

being *numerically* identical to ourselves. It is these aspects of our identity that get a burglar traced and thereafter convicted when facing a witness in a police line-up.

Finally, we live by a certain *worldview* containing our moral stands, our religious (dis)beliefs, our political affinities, and other convictions about life. Forensic features mentioned above become bestowed with meaning in the light of these moralistic outlooks. A person's gender, for example, is not some neutral, context-independent personal mark, but evokes different connotations in different social surroundings and, consequently, influences her self-image.[15] Generally, we could state that by expressing and thereby integrating our physical, psychological, biographical and moralistic marks, we try to establish a representation of ourselves that matches our 'experience' of identity as closely as possible.[16]

1.1.2 The concept of identity

Before continuing the excavation of the intricate layers of human identity it might be useful to do some clearing of the concept itself. What are we actually talking about here? I have used the term numerous times already, invoking different connotations each time, but lacking a straightforward definition. As goes for almost any philosophical concept, there is little agreement on the actual meaning of the concept of identity. There are probably as many definitions as there are books on the problem. Nonetheless, although one of the first things every aspirant philosopher gets taught, is that clear cut definitions of concepts are hard to get by in philosophy, I will at least try to bring some clarity into the matter. So, let us have a closer look at the concept itself by reverting to its roots and stubbornly add another definition before moving on.[17]

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[15] In the sixth section of chapter 2 I will have a look into the cultural and contextual biases of identity formation.

[16] In day-to-day use people hardly distinguish between different concepts of identity. Forensic, psychological or moral identity; they are all uncritically used under the header of identity. An item on criminality in the eight o'clock news, hence applying a forensic concept of identity, may easily be followed by an item on lifestyle, under the very same banner of identity.

[17] A great number of books and articles have been published in the past decades about the problem of identity, investigating it not only from a philosophical, but also from a political, sociological, technological, psychological and moral point of view. E.g. Castells 2004, Gergen 1991, Zizek 1997, Giddens 1991, Metzinger 2004, Ricoeur 1994, Bauman 2006, Damasio 1999, Van den Berg 2009, Jenkins 2004, Spitzer 2004. Despite this vast amount of literature, I deem it desirable – in fact *because of* this multitude of theories – to develop a comprehensive account of human identity into which crucial aspects of those views have found their way.

There are two ways of tracing the word 'identity' ethymologically. In the first reading the word ‘identity’ is a derivative composition of the latin adverb *idem* (‘same’) and the noun *entitas* (‘being’). In that case, identity literally means 'the same being'. It clearly refers to our common use of identity as diachronical similarity, that is, a thing staying the same over time. In other words, a thing’s identity is what enables us to recognise it at different moments in time as precisely *this very same* being. The similarity can reside in its shape or, in case of a person, her behaviour or personality.

In the second reading, we cut the word 'identity' into the latin definite pronoun 'id' and the noun 'entis', the genitive of 'ens[18]', signifying a 'being in itself'. Understood thus, identity means 'the thisness of a being in itself'. So, a being's identity describes its nature, the qualities that render it precisely *that* being and no other. In a somewhat medieval fashion we could purport that a being’s identity represents its inner kernel, its *essence*, the principle feature which makes it into what it is. The identity involves a being’s essential ingredients, devoid of which it would be something different. Identity then becomes the *principium individuationis*, the single trait or assembly of traits that renders it uniquely distinguishable from all other beings.

If we now combine these two complementary connotations of the word 'identity', the following definition occurs: whenever we apply the word identity to a being, we refer to *the enduring set of unique characteristics, which lend the being its individuality and decribes its essential features, thereby also rendering it recognisable over time*. The identity of a being comprises the qualities that give it both endurance, by referring to the source of *temporal permanence* within it, and *spatial diversity* from other beings. The two antipoles of identity are difference (synchronically) and change (diachronically). Yet, Hegel’s lessons in dialectics apply here too: no position without negation. Without its antipoles, any statement of identity would be senseless. Therefore, paradoxically, the concept of identity simultaneously stands for sameness and distinction. Identity means persisting distinction. In the case of human beings, these two aspects of identity usually coincide: what distinguishes a person from others is what gives her temporal sameness and recognisability, whether this is her particular looks or her particular character.[19]

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[18] The exact historic meaning of the word ‘identitas’ remains unclear, since it has ambiguous origins.

[19] This excludes by no means the social dimension of identities. A substantial part of a person's identity is what she has in common with others, rather than what distinguishes her from the rest. Take nationality

1.1.3 The experience of selfhood

Returning to Vesey's distinction between self-identity and personal identity, we are now in the position to ask ourselves: what is the *idem* of the beings that we are? What is present in us that persists over time in such a way that it bestows us with the profound and distinctive experience of self-identity? What justifies my claim of being the same person as the young lad that 14 years ago adventurously set out for the city of Rotterdam to submerge himself in the world of academic sciences? In spite of everything happening in between I still hold the firm belief of being the same human being. As Marres puts it: "No matter how heterogenous my experiences are, I recognise them as experiences that are mine or have been mine. What now founds this fundamental unity, which causes all those mental processes to be mine?" (Marres 1991: 146).[20]

In a slightly old-fashion argot we could ask: what is the *substance* – in its original ethymological sense of 'something underlying' – of our identity: what lies beneath our experience of selfhood? What does it take for me to wake up tomorrow morning as myself, like the way I did all the past mornings of my life? What is it that I experience, whenever I have the experience of staying the same person, even though my body and personality have since changed? (Ibid: 147) Paul Ricoeur, too, acknowledges this to be the nub of the question after identity: "…permanence in time thus becomes the transcendental of numerical identity. The entire problematic of personal identity will revolve around this search for a relational invariant, giving it the strong significance of permanence in time" (Ricoeur 1994: 118). I might decide to turn my life upside down, quit my research job and look for some menial work in the port of Rotterdam, and still wake up as the same Jeroen tomorrow morning. (At four o'clock probably, due to the new time table!) Why is that so? What causes a human being to wake up every morning inescapably being herself? Why is it that we are always fettered to ourselves?

Vesey summarizes the argument by differentiating between a so-called *unity question*, searching for the *diachronic* principle of self-identity, and the *identity question*, searching for the *synchronic* principle of recognition and individuality. Vesey puts the

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as an example. That what is distinctive, can be both of individual and of collective nature. Identities are not primarily individualistic or collective; in each in human being a unique mix of the two exists. I will come back to this in section 6 of the next chapter.

[20] Author's translation.

unity question this way: "In his lifetime a person has many sensations, feelings, emotions, thoughts, memories and so on. All these experiences have one thing in common: they are all *his* experiences, they are all in *his* mind. But what is it for different experiences to have this in common? What *unites* a person's present experiences with the past experiences? Is it a matter of their all being related to one and the same self-conscious self, or of their all being related to one and the same continuing experience which acts as a sort of background to them, or of their all being related to each other in some way, or what? What is the principle of unity?" (Vesey 1974: 7).

In the following sections, I will go along with Vesey's suggestion that in answering the unity question, and thereby discovering the principles that unite our senations over stretches of time, we will hold a (partial) answer to the identity question, by having discovered some of the features that discern a person's identity from others'. The answers to the unity question roughly fall into three categories: the so-called *simple view,* a *psychological* approach and a *somatic* explanation of the problem of identity (Cf. Olson 2002: 6). The next three sections try to give an answer according to this tripartition. Alongside this search for the substance of self-identity, notice will be taken of several doctrines that played a central role in the history of Western thinking on identity: an analysis of Cartesian thought will be provided in section 2, an account of John Locke's thoughts on personal identity in section 3, and a return to Aristotle in the fourth section.

1.2 Descartes' legacy

Aber das Ich ist der finstere Punkt im Bewusstsein,
wie auf der Netzhaut gerade der Eintrittspunkt
des Sehenerven blind ist, wie [...]
das Auge alles sieht, nur sich selbst nicht.
Arthur Schopenhauer

The most famous and striking answer – *avant la lettre* – to the unity question has undoubtedly been given by René Descartes. Although Descartes never went into the

question after personal identity *expressis verbis*, his ideas still provide footing for a lot of contemporary theories. In modern debates his position goes by the name of the so-called 'simple view' on identity. According to its adherents the experience of identity is something in itself, something irreducible. We seem to experience our identities in an autonomous ontological domain, which is reducible neither to the body exclusively, to the psyché, nor to some other primary substance alone (Cf. Noonan 2003: 95-97, Olsen 2002: 6-7). As Noonan writes:

> "Persistence of body or brain or psychological continuity and connectedness are criteria of personal identity only in the sense of evidence: they are not what personal identity *consists* in [...] personal identity is an ultimately unanalysable fact, distinct from everything observable or experienceable that might be evidence for it. Persons are separately existing entities, distinct from their brains, bodies and experiences." (Noonan 2003: 16).[21]

The simple view has its phenomenological origins in the *experiential fact* of self-identity, as I described in the opening example of the former section: the mysterious experience of staying the same human being in all times and places, despite all the *laps* of memory we might have, life-changing events, and the continuous changes our bodies are exposed to. Charles Taylor similarly observes: "Who among us can understand our thought being anywhere else but inside, 'in the mind'? Something in the nature of our experience of ourselves seems to make the current localisation almost irresistible, beyond challenge" (Taylor 1989: 112). Since the roots of this stance go all the way back to Descartes' philosophy, it might be useful to have a closer look at his ideas.

1.2.1 Body and mind

Descartes was the first modern philosopher to teach us that truth does not dwell somewhere in the Heavens or in God, but lies within us. In order to access this truth, Descartes deployed an introspective method of increasing abstraction: refraining from

[21] Noonan does not differentiate between self-identity and personal identity. Here he apparently uses the term *personal* identity referring to what I call *self*-identity.

all modalities of body and mind, he pushed through to the pure, substantial, self-reflective *cogito*, which makes up the indubitable, irreducible epistemological ground of reality. Descartes discovered that a human being can doubt everything, apart from herself as a thinking being. "I am not this assemblage of limbs called the human body; I am not a thin and penetrating air spread through all these members; I am not a wind, a breath of air, a vapour, or anything at all that I can invent or imagine, since I have supposed that all those things were nothing, and yet, without changing this supposition, I find I am nevertheless certain that I am something" (Descartes 1968: 105). The *ego cogito* constitutes the *fundamentum inconcussum* onto which the widespread tree of human knowledge has been built. There is no knowledge I possess with greater clarity and firmness than the one of myself as *res cogitans*.

Descartes went on to call this our *essence*: "I rightly conclude that my essence consists in this alone, that I am a thinking thing, or a substance whose whole essence or nature consists in thinking" (Ibid: 156). He concluded that the soul cannot be but immaterial: "... I concluded that I was a substance, of which the whole essence or nature consists in thinking, ... this 'I', that is to say, the mind, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body, ... " (Ibid: 54). To Descartes the soul was the *idem*, that which stayed the same within the somatic stream of transformations and all the affects that besiege the human body, founding this sameness on a sense of inner life, which ultimately needs neither the body nor any other corporeal nature (Cf. Karther 2003: 53).

It can hardly come as a surprise that Descartes' ideas still strongly influence our view of what self-conscious persons are. Be it that he may have been wrong on a couple of notorious occasions, Descartes expressed some intuitions on human consciousness that are difficult to refute. Even more so, he caused a revolution in our worldview, which I will explain later in this section. For now it is important to keep in mind that Descartes' reflections on body and consciousness have provided us with the matrix that still underlies current debates on human identity.

After the mechanization of the worldview in the seventeenth century, which entailed the end of animistic theories on the relation between mind and matter, three ways of explaining the human mind were left: either one endorsed a radical, ontological distinction between mind and body, or one reduced spiritual phenomena to emergent properties of an underlying, cerebral substratum, or, finally, one reduced all phenomena

(both spiritual and material) to an all-pervading *spiritus*, in for example the idealisms of Berkeley and Hegel. In the remainder of this subsection I will deal with some of the paradoxes provoked by Descartes' own position of an ontological dualism. A position, which, as the upcoming examples will show, has become accepted on many levels.

Let us for a start take up the example of a neurophysician who, after a long day at the laboratory of submitting people to experiments that uncover the fallacy of consciousness, on her way home unluckely hits a cyclist with her car. When facing a judge after having been sued by the unfortunate cyclist, it is very unlikely that she will walk free by referring to the neurophysiological processes that uwittingly caused her to hit the cyclist's bike. Our physician will pay! (Or her insurance, if she is lucky..) One cannot build a modern, constitutional state on a conception of consciousness as completely determined by neurophysiological processes. Our society has been founded upon the undisputed assumption of personal autonomy. That is why we regard the driver as a rational, freely acting subject and hold her responsible for her deeds. It also explains why we punish a murderer more severly than someone committing manslaughter, since murder implies the *mental intention* to kill another human being. We built our legal system on the assumption of being autonomous, self-conscious creatures, as a result of which we hold the driver of the car, being a rational, freely acting subject, responsible for the accident.

We have become used to living with the supposition that the mind is in command of the neurological steering wheel of the body. On a political, moral or juridical level, in almost any department of ordinary life – save maybe for philosophy and neurosciences, which of course can hardly be called ordinary! – is the Cartesian distinction between mind and body effective, granting causal powers to the former. In the above case, we depart from the idea that the car driver as a thinking and acting subject steered her car freely and wittingly into a certain direction. The post-Cartesian struggle in mental healthcare may serve as another example of our ambiguous notion of how minds work, and of some of the awkward cultural splits this dualism entails. It has resulted in the perennial controversy between psychologists and psychiatrists on how to treat mental illness. Alternatively, consider how we are used to refer to ourselves, by using terms such as 'my' or 'your' body, which is probably the best evidence for how deeply ingrained Descartes' intuitions have become in folk psychology – or maybe even: how right he was! The simplest of all examples probably is the expression '*my body* is

aching'. Whose body? Instead of saying 'the body that I am' (which would be more correct as I will show in section 4) we use a genitive: it is *me and my body*![22]

This way of thinking gets perfectly 'embodied' in all sorts of cultural phenomena. Bodies are often experienced as an obstacle when exerting our postulated psychophysical freedom. Many people still see the body, with all its spatial boundaries and kinetic limitations, as a dungeon of the soul, whether they are neo-platonic cyberfreaks, two people passionately in love in vain trying to become one, or a tennis player just not able to execute her shots the way she had in mind. As I mentioned earlier, Descartes' legacy is strong enough as to make the conviction persist of the mind as the driver operating the wheel that steers bodily movements. We use all kinds of tools – from bicycle to artificial limbs and EPO – to overcome physical restrictions of bodily movement. On the other hand, although it might seem that we are eager to leave our bodies behind in a world of (*science) fiction* in which our boldest fantasies become real, we are still very much attached to our bodies in terms of sensatory arousal, fitness, health, beauty and self-image. Thanks to modern medical and pharmaceutical technologies the body has become part of the reflexive project of the self (Giddens 1991). On the basis of her identity, that is, her (desired) self-image, a person may choose to transform her appearance by means of clothes, fitness training, body adornments or even surgical procedures. All of such interventions rest upon a Cartesian mind-body dualism.

1.2.2 Subjectivity – Rationality – Autonomy

The reason why it became possible since the Enlightenment to conceive of human beings as fundamentally free and able to 'mold' the body, lies in Descartes' conception of rationality and the way in which it has been considered since then. Rationality became *instrumental*. Because we were able to grasp the mechanical order of things, we deemed it possible to influence their course. "Gaining insight into the world as mechanism is inseparable from seeing it as a domain of potential instrumental control" (Taylor 1989: 149). This is what En*lighten*ment means: throwing light on reality in

[22] The way our language works probably has a large influence on our view of the mind-body relation. The grammar of indo-european languages favours constructions as the one above, using a genitive and substantivizing both body and mind.

such a way as to X-ray it, grasp it, and as a result steering it. A contemporary medical docter, for example, is able to perform surgery and heal a patient because of the precise knowledge he has of the human body (which is a fairly recent thing), while a geologist, to give a completely different example, is able to trace precious fossil resources in favour of human ends because of knowledge of soil quality, sedimentary layers, movement of the earth's crust and paleontological data. This modern notion of 'mastery' can be traced back to Descartes' *Discours de la Methode*: "For they [some general notions concerning fysics, jt] caused me to see that it is possible to attain knowledge which is very useful in life, and that, […] we may find a practical philosophy by means of which, kwowing the force and the action of fire, water, air, the stars, heavens and all other bodies that environ us, as distinctly as we know the different crafts of our artisans, we can in the same way employ them in all those uses to which they are adapted, and thus render ourselves the *masters and possessors of nature*" (Descartes 1968: 78). As far as the human organism is concerned, Descartes conceived of the mind as the command post which operates the body's motions by controlling the 'spirits animaux' (Cf. Taylor 1989: 143-58). According to Descartes, we are free because we understand. That is why, as Bacon noticed before Descartes, knowledge is power.

It is important to keep in mind, though, that people were not all of a sudden free and rational, but they started conceiving of themselves as autonomous *because* of their being rational. Enlightenment meant discovering the power of rationality as a source of human freedom. Whereas in older worldviews people had no choice but to resign to their destiny, in the new paradigm they thought they could actively take life in their hands. In his book *Eurotaoism* German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk shows us that this freedom *de facto* means the freedom to move, thereby turning mobility into the essence of modernity (Cf. Sloterdijk 1991: 25-48). Abandoned by God and relegated by modern cosmology to an insignificant side-arm of the galaxy, humans have liberated themselves since the Renaissance from the medieval religious shackles, relying on their moral rationality, scientific knowledge and technical ingenuity. As *maître et possesseur de la nature* (Western) men pushed God from his throne and became to consider themselves as the intelligent designers of civilised society. As a consequence of this paradigm shift in the West, which was called *Enlightenment* only later, we suffer from the moral disease of deeming life worthy and meaningful only if we lead an active,

creative life. The type of freedom that distinguishes us from the rest of nature resides in our ability to initiate a non-intuitive sequence of movements spontaneously, based on a pre-existing idea in our heads. Being free means having the ability to set in motion a chain of events at any given time. The concept of human freedom, which has been phrased primarily in moral and political terms of progress, *de facto* boils down to a logic of physical acceleration. 'I run, therefore I am', a contemporary Descartes could have written.[23] The myth of endless economic growth that modern man believes in, following in the wake of this mental turn, can partially be explained, as we saw earlier this chapter, by the shift from vertical to horizontal creation of meaning: instead of trusting on God's mercy we feel we have to create our well-being, pleasures and material comforts ourselves during our short telluric stay.

1.2.3 Descartes' heritage

It is not miraculous that Cartesian ideas still appeal to us today. His influence on science, philosophy and even common opinion can hardly be overestimated. Notwithstanding a couple of flagrant mistakes, Descartes expressed some fundamental intuitions on human consciousness which are difficult to refute. He did not only cause an epistemological revolution, but also a far-reaching change of perspective on our portrayal of mankind. Until the present day Cartesian ideas on mind and body provide the matrix that encapsulates the discussion on human identity. We can distinguish at least three major influences of Descartes on subsequent history.

Firstly, modern scientific methods adhere to the principle of radical doubt, that is, scientific theories should be regarded as hypotheses, should be falsifiable and are therefore under constant scrutiny. We could contend that Descartes' scepsis has been institutionalised (Giddens 1991). Secondly, Descartes and his contemporaries stood on the brink of the mechanization of our worldview. Parallelled to his instrumental view of rationality, it lead to the assumption that humans possess the intellectual capacities to improve their own fate. Also it lead to their self-declared stewardship over nature.

[23] Or better, were he a car-driving Descartes: 'I am in a jam, therefore I am.'

Thirdly, as already mentioned, we are strongly inclined to separate mind and body, and view the mind as the true headquarters of our identity. Who would dare say that the identity of someone suffering from a severe paralysis caused by a car crash has been definitely altered? Probably, her self-view will have changed, but we are certaily dealing with the same person (Cf. Karther 2003: 50-1). Everyone knows the example of the worldfamous British natural scientist Stephen Hawking, who has been struck by a devastating neuromotor disease. Yet, although his body has stiffened almost completely, restricting his movement to eyeblinks and tiny finger movements, making him communicate thanks to a computer interface only, we still regard this person, on behalf of his mental characteristics, as the same Stephen Hawking from before his illness.

We cannot simply dismiss Descartes' conception of the soul all too easily, because of modern sociological insights into the constructedness and liquidity of human identity, or because of the amounting neuro-experimental evidence against it. It still has a firm basis in phenomenology and everyday life. As Sherry Turkle righlty notices in her book on modern identity:

> ".. for many people it is hard to accept any challenge to the idea of an autonomous ego. While in recent years, many psychologists, social theorists, psychoanalysists, and philosophers have argued that the self should be thought of as essentially decentered, the normal requirements of everyday life exert strong pressure on people to take responsibility for their actions and to see themselves as intentional and unitary actors. This disjuncture between theory (the unitary self is an illusion) and lived experience (the unitary self is the most basic reality) is one of the main reasons why multiple and decentered theories have been slow to catch on – or when they do, why we tend to settle back quickly into older, centralized ways of looking at things" (Turkle 1995: 15).

By implication, we should not throw Descartes' theory of the *cogito* out with the bathwater. If we do so because of the fact that nowadays we understand personal identities to be mobile and decentered, then we fall prey to a categorical mistake: we compare apples to oranges. Descartes is clearly referring to a different type of identity: the one I termed *self-identity*.

The question remains what causes this autophenomenological experience of identity? Should we, such as the adherents to the *simple view* do, surrender to the *cogito* as an unfathomable factum? Or is it possible to discern at least some minimal requirements that should be met in order for a human being to have an experience of self-identity?

1.3 Remember me

The past is something we can see, but cannot touch.
Chinese saying

If there is *one* quality required in order to have an experience of identity, then it is a decent working memory. We owe it to our memory that our daily portion of sleep does not disable the continuity of our identity. A loss of the ability to recollect past experiences and acquired knowledge would unarguably imply a loss of identity as well. Humans have at least three types of memory. First, there is motoric memory. We share this most basic form of memory with all other living creatures that have a central nervous system. The majority of movements we produce get stored by our organisms through frequent repetition without ever making it to consciousness. It ranges from elementary skills such as walking to complex operations as playing an instrument in a big orchestra and the unconscious coordination of arms, legs and senses while driving a car.

Besides this motoric memory humans have an event memory: the ability to recall past events, often called *autobiographical memory*. Finally, humans have a *factual memory:* they are able to store non-experiential facts. From my history courses I recall, for example, that the Western Roman Empire fell in the year 476 *post mortem Christi*, but simultaneously I remember having a lunch date with an attractive colleague next Friday.[24] All three of these forms of memory intermingle and are crucial to our experience of identity. If I suddenly happened to lose the ability to drive a car, or would suffer from instant long-term amnesia, or lost my capacity to store new information,

[24] For the tripartition, see Noonan 2003: 9.

then this would have severe consequences for my sense of identity, if not wiping it out altogether.

1.3.1 Locke's conception of personal identity

John Locke was the first philospher in history to suggest that memory might be the most significant criterion for diachronic identity. In the chapter *Of Identity and Diversity* in his *Essay concerning human understanding* (1690), Locke coined the problem of *personal identity* and gave it its prominent place on the philosophical agenda, which it currently enjoys more than ever. A generation later, Hume even went so far as to claim: "Memory alone, […] is to be considered as the source of personal identity" (Hume 1964: 542). Thus, Locke stands at the outset of the so called 'psychological approach' to the identity question as I mentioned at the end of section 1. Since Locke's influence on the debate on personal identity is still felt today, one can safely contend that the debate moved in Locke's impressive footsteps ever since (Cf. Noonan 2003: 24). Many recent debates – in anglo-american literature predominantly – on the consequences of brain transplantation and artificial intelligence, for example, refer directly back to Locke, by connecting to an age-long tradition of pondering the possibility of a migrating consciousness. Something that according to Locke is possible, as we will see hereafter.

Locke discriminates between a *human being* and a *person*. A human is a body that is situated in spacetime, consisting of multiple substances, and obtaining its characteristic form due to a formal principle of organisation (we would probably call that DNA-code nowadays). It is this unique, to each individual specific, pattern of organisation, which renders humans identifyable. Human identity consists in this peculiar *organisation of life*, this unique collection of bodily features that is recognised by others. Therefore, in Locke's view, the body does belong to the identity of a *human*, but not to *personal* identity.

He describes a *person*, on the other hand, as a "thinking, intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it: It being impossible for

anyone to perceive, without perceiving, that he does perceive" (Locke 1975: 335). So a person is a *self-conscious*, *thinking being*. From this we should not infer that, according to Locke, persons equal Cartesian minds. On the contrary, Locke strongly opposes Descartes, who puts consciousness and the thinking substance on a par: "For the same consciousness being preserved, whether in the same or different Substances, the personal Identity is preserved" (Ibid: 338). Locke refuses categorically to declare to which *substance* this thinking being belongs, whether it is of bodily, spiritually or even God-like nature. No matter the substance it migrates to, as long as the same consciousness is preserved, personal identity remains intact.

One of the explanations Locke gives for this maybe somewhat peculiar notion of identity lies in the fact that every human being is composed of billions of elementary particals, that belonged to many other creatures in the past and will go into many others, after they will have gone through the life-cycle of a particular body. A carbon molecule is indifferent to whether it is stuck in me or in flower! Still, despite of its 'neutrality', I do have (self)conscious experiences. Apparently, the nature of the substance consciousness resides in – as long as it sustains intelligent human life – does not matter that much.

A person is – put in a spinozistic fashion – a thinking mode within any substance that is capable of having representations. A person has an identity, in as far as she is able to combine past and present representational contents in the same consciousness.[25] Personal identity resides in the self-perception of a thinking thing as being the "the same thinking thing in different times and places. […] For since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and 'tis that, that makes every one to be, what he calls *self*; and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists *personal identity*, i.e. the sameness of a rational Being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person" (Ibid: 335).[26] One could say, a person consists of a stream of thoughts that became self-conscious, i.e. conscious of their occurence in the same thinking thing.

[25] Although memory is evidently presupposed here as a necessary condition for having self-identity, Locke does not use the term itself anywhere!

[26] Just as we saw with Noonan, Locke does not make a distinction between self-identity and personal identity. Again, when Locke speaks of personal identity, he refers to what I term *self-identity*. Personal identity is in Locke's view determined by psychological identity.

That is why I deem the concept of *psychological identity* very apt to describe Locke's view on identity: it is the *psyche*, the thinking thing, that stays the same over time. For Locke, personal identity requires the (self)conscious recollection of a former state of mind. If persons did not have this ability to recall past mentals states, then having an experience of personal identity would become impossible. Clearly, in Locke's perspective, only healthy, rational humans with a decent memory are eligible for becoming persons.

1.3.2 Questioning Locke's view

Locke's analysis calls for a couple of important questions. First and foremost, the crucial problem – what *underlies* the experience of identity? – still lingers in the background. Locke has undoubtedly discovered an important prerequisite of having an experience of identity, but he did not explain its *kernel*. What precisely is staying the same, and why so? Locke seems to have fallen victim to a circularity in his argument: should there not be some sort of identity already, in order for a person to remember herself as staying that particular person? What underlies this similarity? Let me explain my objection with the following example.

A couple of years ago I got my master in Philosophy. There is no doubt in my mind, that the person now writing these lines is the same as the one graduating at that glorious moment. What justifies me in drawing this conclusion? Suffices the memory of the ceremony? I can remember events I haven not witnessed personally, but which I heard of at second hand or saw on television. I can even think of fictitious events. Furthermore, the mental image I have of myself does not necessarily diverge from that of other persons present in that situation. I can picture myself lecturing just as well as I can picture the audience listening. So it looks like I need to have a concept of identity *already*, that is, I have to know that it was *me* who graduated on that sunny day, in order to remember *myself* as being part of it. Memory alone does not explain why it is the same consciousness remembering itself.[27] (Cf. Marres 1991: 27)

[27] I still think I am justified in identifying myself with the doctorand; in the next section I will explain why.

A second argument against Locke's theory concerns the reliability of our memory. Our memory is highly fragmented: it is full of laps; on average we spend every day eight hours asleep; vast parts of the time we are awake get occupied with routine work that disappears in the dark abyss of oblivion immediately. Just try to remember what you did in the last 24 hours and you will see how difficult remembering accurately is, let alone all the thousands of days of your life that went by without leaving a trace! Human biography consists of a few, precious instants of discontinuity which, by briefly breaking the monotony of everyday life, illuminate the gloomy night of our personal histories.

In addition, it remains to be seen whether the scarse moments we *do* remember make up for trustworthy representations of what actually happened. Our memory is fallible. Sometimes we even wittingly distort the truth: do we not make our beloved partner just a tiny bit more handsome in our imagination? And can I not have dreamed something realistically to such a degree that I start asking myself whether it really happened or not? Besides, forgetting is a law of life. Remembering means selecting. We would become crushed psychologically by the weight of all the memories and thoughts we had to carry, if every experience stuck in our consciousness. We are compelled to put things aside, for not to drown in the vast sea of negative emotions, self-doubts and embarrassing moments.

In the third place, memory in itself is only the *intellectual capacity* that enables the *praxis* of remembrance. It is the actual remembrances that form the building stones of our identities. Remembering does not mean the opening of a neatly organised and unchanging cerebral drawer, such as it was long thought of, but our memory stands under constant reconstruction. Neurological research has shown that our memory works as a living network, rather than an antique cupboard. This causes remembrances to be continuously redefined. History is written time and time again: both on a personal as on a societal level. Just think of the witnesses of car accidents who, despite of the fact that they witnessed the same accident, all recount different happenings. The definite book on history does not exist: our history lies in the future. Every time we recall things, we change history and alter the content of our identities along with it.

The fourth objection I want to raise leads up to the argument that will be unfolded in the next section. It concerns the overall possibility of consciously *experienced* memories. A person may have knowledge of her past happenings, but is she capable of

reviving that past moment? Can she have exact knowledge of the state of mind she is referrering to? Can she – as presently (self)conscious being – recollect exactly what it was like to undergo that experience? Take for example the well-known act of looking at childhood photographs. As soon as I spot a picture taken of myself, I know on my parents' word that it is me. But there is no way I can deliberately and consciously recall the particular situation I was in. Even if I were to have some shreds of memories, it is still impossible to recall the entire situation and to genuinely 'copy', so to speak, my former state of consciousness.

The one big difference between live experiences and memories is the body. Memories are *mental images* of events that on an earlier moment in time have been *lived through* psycho-physically. Although my heartbeat speeds up, my blood pressure rises and I become warm and sweaty when having certain (non-specified!) memories, they are still only superficial reminiscences of the 'real thing'. Only thoughts, which never existed somewhere else than in the mind, can be mentally repeted undilutedly. To go back for a moment to the earlier mentioned example of my graduation: it is impossible for me to revive the exact affective, neurophysiological and hormonal reaction I had, when the members of the committee fired their difficult questions at me. In that respect, the 'feeling' of oneself, seems to stand 'out of time': life consists of unique moments impossible to hold on to. Although we may experience an emotional reaction whilst thinking of a past event, or remember having had a certain feeling at the time, 'feeling back in time' seems utterly impossible. The present is a timeless moment, caught up in an ever-vanishing non-spot between history and future. An *eternal truth* so to say. Yet, I still remain convinced of staying the same person over the course of time. So I ask again: what causes this autophenomenological experience of identity?

1.4 The ecological self

> The original distinction between self and other is a deep biological principle; one might say it is the deepest principle, for biology begins in *self*-preservation – in the emergence of entities (the simplest replicators) who resisted destruction and decay, who combatted, at least for a short time, the Second Law of Thermodynamics, and passed their capacity to do this to their descendants.
>
> *Daniel Dennett*

Descartes' philosophy of nature marked the demise of the centuries-old, graeco-christian view of the body as 'animated matter', and it succesfully launched the idea of the body as a mechanical device, subjected to the laws of nature. Nevertheless, although this meant a fundamental rupture within our view of the 'human animal' split into body and mind, even Descartes could not deny granting a body to the soul in order to host it during its stay in this world. We all know the problem Descartes had to deal with in consequence, in relating these two substances to each other. As the following quote from Paul Ricoeur asserts, finding the 'pineapple gland' is as difficult in the twentyfirst century as it was in Descartes' days: "…understanding the way in which our own body is at once a body like any other (situated among other bodies) and an aspect of the self (its manner of being in the world) is a problem of vast proportions" (Ricoeur 1994: 33). Let us take up the challenge. I want to propose two ways of tracing the body's role with regard to our (experience of) identity, thereby giving two examples of the 'somatic approach' to the problem of identity.

1.4.1 Ecological selfhood

To begin with, the discovery of the body's boundaries commences as soon as a human being leaves the primordial body: its mother. Newly borns immediately set out on the adventurous journey of learning where their own organisms end and the rest of the world begins. An elementary form of self-awareness grows when a neonate starts to coordinate the movements of its limbs and to perceive the relative distances between

itself and its surroundings.[28] In an article on self-knowledge Ulric Neisser calls this notion of selfhood the *ecological self*: "The ecological self is the self as perceived with respect to the physical environment: 'I' am the person here in this place, engaged in this particular activity" (Neisser, in: Kolak & Martin 1991: 386). Neisser conceives of the ecological self in the first place as the visual center of perceiving the position and movement of the body. Ecological self-awareness – after the Greek 'oikos', meaning 'home' – comes down to an organism's (implicit) knowledge of its own boundaries in relation to its environment, and to control its movements accordingly (Ibid: 389-90)[29].

This elementary kind of self-awareness is, on different levels, present in the whole of the biosphere. From the simple receptiveness of bacteriae to the complex, symbolical consciousness of humans, all living creatures are defined by their egoistic striving – this is what Spinoza called *conatus* – for the preservation of their own organisms amidst a harsh, impinging outer reality. Compare it to what Daniel Dennett writes about the genesis of selfhood: "So a minimal self is […] something abstract which amounts just to the existence of an organisation which tends to distinguish, control, and preserve portions of the world, an organisation that thereby creates and maintains boundaries" (Dennett, in: Kolak & Martin 1991: 358). This original form of 'selfishness' is one of the generic features of all living nature. Dennett even calls it, as we read in the exergue opening this section, its 'deepest principle'.

The edges of the body make up for the divide between self and other. When thinking of myself I think in the first place of a body, located in space and time. (Try it!) Consciousness is always situated spatially. I am first and foremost 'this thing here'. I am the spatial center of perceiving the world. The denominizer 'self' refers in this case to a thinking, perceiving and sensitive body. It refers to the psychophysical totality, situated in spacetime, that *I* am. It is what Neisser called the ecological self. It has to be acknowledged, though, that some bodily parts seem more indispensable for evoking an experience of self-identity than others. Although every part of our body provides neural

[28] I call this *self-awareness* rather thans *self-consciousness*, since it concerns a pre-symbolical type of self-referential knowledge.

[29] Neisser observes that this boundary can be shifted outward by clothes or a vehicle like a car, which we experience as our second skin. So the ecological self does not necessarily coincide with the biological body. One could go even further and argue that by virtue of planning future actions, the (human) ecological self extends itself in time. Equally, cyberspace could be said to expand the ecological self spatially.

input and interacts with other internal or even outer parts, the brain obviously seems the prime candidate for constituting identity's headquarters. In the vast pool of literature on personal identity, the strong version of this thesis goes by the name of the *brain criterium*.

The *brain criterium* involves the opinion that only the brain is responsible for the existence of self-identity, which, subsequently, wanders with the brain. The time-honoured problem of the migration of souls has almost become reality thanks to the nigh technology of brain transplantation. If one replaces the brain of a body by another one, what will be the identity of the newly composed hybrid? Imagine the situation of waking up in a completely different, 'pimped body' – supposing for the moment this were possible – would you not hold the opinion of still being the same person, in spite of the new, fancy shell?

Yet, according to the theory of ecological selfhood, this can be no other than a thought experiment. For the time being, it is only the naturally grown body that supports ecological selfhood, and by consequence the experience of self-identity. One of the arguments against the brain criterium is, that a brain has developed the way it did *only in a particular body*. Every combination of body and brain is unique. In a different body the brain would not be the same and the neurological tuning between brain and the rest of the body would be lacking completely. The brain is not formed by genetic instructions alone, but develops in interaction with the rest of the body. Even more so, it is constantly subjected to impinging outer forces, such as nutrition, environment and cultural influences. It is a well-known medical fact that behaviour influences the brain, just as much as the brain causes behaviour. If I were to engage, for example, in long-term mathematical training my brain would show different neural connections and brain activity from the situation in which I would spend my days reading pulp-fiction novels.

The insights about the bodily foundation of self-awareness I put forward in this section might seem at odds with what I said earlier about core-selfness and the first person perspective in relation to Descartes' and Kant's philosophies. However, the fact that every first person perspective is necessarily tied to a body, does not abrogate its existence at all. In the end, this is one of the most important lessons philosophers of mind such as Descartes and Kant taught us, namely that whenever we talk of human identity, we have to take the existence of this first person perspective into account. In

fact, up until the present day no theory whatsoever achieved to cogently disprove the existence of a first perspective in human beings. Therefore, although I do certainly not adopt Descartes' dualism, I do acknowledge the existence of self-referentiality as a uniquely human feature in itself.

1.4.2 Matter and form

This brings me to the second attempt at providing self-identity with a bodily foundation. One of the first great philosophers will have the final saying in this section. I want to look into two of Aristotle's works to extract a second formula to go deeper into the relation between mind and matter, between body and soul: his *Physics* and his work on the soul, *De Anima*. In the *Physics* Aristotle unfolds his classic theory on causality, of which mainly the so-called *causa materialis* and the *causa formalis* are of importance in this argument. Once they have been created (*causa efficiens*), the material and the formal cause are the principle causes of all living creatures. In Aristotle's theory of 'hylomorphism', a body is seen as the matter, of which the soul (anima) is the essential form (Cf. Aristotle 1995: 28). Every organism strives for expressing its original potential – which comes with every living composition of matter – in its final form. To a human organism this 'animation' means both *being alive*, and *expressing* its typical human nature, which resides in its powers of reason, perception, and automobility (Cf. Aristotle 1995: 32). Because of this unique combination of soul and body one cannot transport the soul to just any arbitrary other body: every living creature has its own, distinguishing soul. Therefore, we cannot describe the relation between body and soul as the one between a computer and its software, as is often claimed in modern literature on consciousness (Cf. Karther 2003: 25).

All parts of the body – its organs – have to be fine-tuned to enable animated life. According to Aristotle a human being is a naturally formed, functionally organised body, which aspires to optimize its natural endowment of being a thinking, perceiving and self-moving body. So, man's essence, that which turns a human being into the man or woman he or she is, is neither body nor mind, but the threefold complex of natural form, matter and their supplementarity. The moment the organism stops thinking and exhails its last breath, an inert, disintegrating pile of atoms is what is left over. Being

animated and being alive are equal to Aristotle. That is why he conceives of the human being, very progressively, as the *animal rationale*, without needing to dissect it radically from the animal reign.[30] Humans share their basal, organic functions with animal creatures, and developed on top of that an extra layer of rationality. Human identity gets determined, in contrast to the view held by later Christian or postcartesian philosophers and theologists, not by the soul alone, but by the inextricable unity of body and soul in every animated being.

I introduced Aristotle, because one could say that his material-formal principle of identity has been identified as DNA in modern moleculair biology. Our genetic code provides us with a relatively constant form over the years, and renders us forensically identifiable. This results in the peculiar fact that, although every seven years almost any molecule in my body is being replaced by a new one – apart maybe from some stemcells –, my identity remains the same. Ricoeur elucidates this notion of identity by referring to a hammer which, even if one changed its head for a spare part, would still be recognised as the same hammer, even though it physically is not. The same goes for the human body. The molecules it has been built of have no personality. They are not even alive. Life is the mysterious, emergent quality that originates from the interaction between molecules, gathered in cells. Even more miraculously, and probably the biggest wonder in the entire cosmos: molecules have organised themselves in such a way into human beings as to become conscious of themselves. All the knowledge we possess, the books written, and the plays staged spring from this unfathomable moment of accidental, autogenetic reflectivity. The extraordinary moment when nature mysteriously got a voice.

Yet, every one of the molecules a human has been built of is replacable. A person now living has been assembled of molecules of millions of deceased former hosts. I could well bear the molecules that once made up Aristotle, Newton or Kant within me! I am nonetheless myself and not Immanuel Kant – luckily! –, neither some sort of formless composition of all those persons. In every cell of me lies my unique genetic code (potential), which ensures every new cell to fit into the original blueprint. This also explains why the brain, notwithstanding the daily decay of thousands of braincells, can maintain its functionality and store information. The experience of self-identity

[30] This is one of Aristoteles' insights that was criticised fiercely by Martin Heidegger, who explicitely refused to view the human as 'animal rationale', for in his view, men ('Dasein') and animals are ontologically two completely different creatures (Cf. Heidegger 1993: 14, 48-50).

persists, because its overall shape and patterns of interaction stay intact over many years, and the brain never loses – apart from some cases of dementia, brain traumas or other neuronal diseases – its innate potential of reconfiguring its own tissue and learning new things. It appears that self-identity is somehow due to *formal* similarity. In this sense the *I* is pure form. It is the self-referential experience of staying the same person over time that mysteriously rises out of the particular configuration of the elementary particles that make up its substratum. This cognitive mechanism of formal continuity turns the *I* into so steady a beacon in an ever-changing material world.

This formal congruence explains why I can be sentenced today for a crime I committed five years ago, without a soul witnessing the felony. The *idem* of a human being, as far as we can objectively establish it, consist of his specific *form*, the self-sustaining arrangement of her molecular structure. For that reason, the art of establishing DNA-profiles provided us with a strong tool for determining an individual's *numerical* identity. Numerical identity means that a thing always coincides with itself and only itself, and will never be anything else as long as it exists. Monovular twins provide us with a good example to explain this concept: although they are qualitatively identical, i.e. naked they look the same, they are nevertheless numerically two different individuals. No matter how much a person changes in the course of her life, numerically she stays the same person. From juvenile dusk till the dawn of life every human being passes through a unique path through spacetime. There is a *formal continuity* between any two moments in a lifetime, precisely because of the genetic sameness that gets reproduced with every new cell.[31] Therefore, we could better call this *dynamic numerical identity*. After all, in case of a human being, both matter, shape and properties such as behaviour, do change. It is merely the overall structure that remains. Growing old is a process of preserving a kernel of identity in a constantly changing context. If it was not for this dynamic numerical idenity, a human would really become someone else in the course of time.

[31] One of the causes of aging, by the way, is probably a deficient copying mechanism, that is, a string of DNA is not copied entirely during replication, causing cellular disfunctions.

1.4.3 Conclusion: the bodily foundation of self-identity

It seems that in order to have an experience of self-identity at least two conditions have to be met: firstly, there has to be a body that stays the same over the course of time in terms of formal organisation. The formed body provides with the continuity that lays the foundation for all other aspects of human identity. Without it, identity would vanish in all its appearances. This is what I called *dynamically numerical identity*. Secondly, there has to be the case of *ecological selfhood*. A creature (probably a human one) has to be neurologically equipped to evoke this particular kind of experience of (self)identity. We may now bring the two approaches together by stating that human bodies are generally *formed* in such a fashion, as to enable a conscious experience of *ecological selfhood*, due to the specific neurological wiring and sensetory make-up of the human organism.

In my view this type of *selfhood* originates in the deeply rooted biological principle, pertaining to all living creatures, of interacting continuously with their environment and through that way developing a 'sense' of selfhood, which in human beings developped itself to such a high degree as to enable us to refer to ourselves reflexively using personal pronouns. Put somewhat more bluntly: when depicting myself as 'I', this 'I' refers to an organism that experiences itself in its *bodily* identity, that is, in staying the *same organism*. In the following passage, the renowned neurologist Antonio Damasio summarizes the biological origins of selfhood in a nutshell:

> "I have come to conclude that the organism, as represented inside its own brain, is a likely biological forerunner for what eventually becomes the elusive sense of self. The deep roots for the self, including the elaborate self which encompasses identity and personhood, are to be found in the ensemble of brain devices which continuously and *nonconsciously* maintain the body state within the narrow range and relative stability required for survival. These devices continually represent, *nonconsciously*, the state of the living body, along its many dimensions. I call the state of activity within the ensemble of such devices the *proto-self*, the nonconscious forerunner for the levels of self which appear in our minds as the conscious protagonists of consciousness: core self and autobiographical self. […] If this idea is correct, life and consciousness,

specifically the self aspect of consciousness, are indelibly interwoven" (Damasio 1999: 22-23).

According to this theory it is the sameness of perspective, the endurance of an organism's specific mode of percepting itself and its environment, that basically accounts for the experience of self-identity. Human beings experience themselves as identical, because of their lasting *neurologically induced outlook* on the world. Over time this causes a relatively stable experience of being-in-the-world. In this view, I cannot possibly be anyone else besides myself, not even when dreaming of being someone else, or in getting under someone else's skin by imagination. Here we come across what is presumably one of the eternal, psychological schisms of mankind: by nature of our thinking, we always aspire to be elsewhere or someone else, yet we are tragically chained to ourselves. That is why at the earlier mentioned graduation party there was only one possible precursor of me. Only the guy standing behind the lectern had the same neurological outlook on the world as I currently have.

1.5 Me, myself and I

Das Subjekt ist etwas am Leibe.
Friedrich Nietzsche

1.5.1 Answering the unity question

Now that we have caught up with some of the all-time classics on identity, the moment has arrived to wrap things up. The above exposition allows for a tentative, preliminary conclusion. The question that set off this journey into the roots of human identity was the so called 'unity question' I posed in section 1. What are the reasons for experiencing sameness over time? What lends unity to all the aspects and experiences that coalesce into *me*? In the attempt to answer this question we discovered – in order of profoundity – the following constitutive layers.

As a bottomline fact there is our *physical constitution*. It needs no further stressing here that the body is, in its particular form, the *conditio sine qua non* of any experience of identity whatsoever. Even counterarguments that abnegate its vital role in constituting identity, as the ones we have encountered in section 3 about implanting one's stream of consciousness artificially into a machine, cannot deny the necessity of some sort of underlying, physical machinery that causes an idiosyncratic outlook on the world. Next to the downloading of all the necessary biographical and characterological data, this new 'organism' would still need to be manufactured in such a way as to cause the same experience of *being in the world*. It would have to think of and perceive the world in exactly the same manner as its former host, only then an ongoing sense of identity will be possible.

These considerations lead us to the second premise of self-identity: having *ecological self-awareness*, i.e. the *experience* of being *the same organism* in all times and places. It involves our self-centeredness and the unique perspective on the world it provokes, founded in our physical blueprint. On distinct moments in time we experience ourselves as the same center of perceiving and interacting with outer reality. From section four we recall the *ecological self* to be the psychophysical center of perception of an organism in dealing with the world, caused by its specific genetic make-up, whilst having a prereflective awareness of its own boundaries and a concern for its preservation and well-being.

A hermeneutic philosopher would probably raise objections to this argument, since according to her view, our way of looking at things is always somehow 'coloured' by our temper, moods or the worldview we inherited from our forebears. In other words, the experience of being a biological self would not be exclusively caused by our neurophysiological structure and consequently not be as fundamental as I am suggesting here. Even though I certainly do not want to undermine the importance of such factors on our way of looking at things, I still would classify them as being *circumstantial* in relation to our sense of self-identity. The reason why I believe so is that even if I experience tremendous revolutions in my life, appear to have altered personality completely, changed my circle of friends drastically, moved away, began to adhere to an obscure religion and may even have adopted a different name, it would still be *me* who underwent all those changes. A more fundamental sense of identity still reverberates within me, which turns these new qualities into *my moods, my penchants*

and my beliefs. No-one else but *me* owns this unique, first-person experience of all those happenings that occurred to me, before and after the far-reaching transformations that put my life's course out of joint. As long as I can speak of *myself* as being changed, as having dealt with ruptures in *my* life, I have to suppose an underlying identity. This fundamental, inalienable sense of self-identity, is what the notion of ecological selfhood refers to.

Third, somewhere during the process of childly maturation springs *self-consciousness* from this ecological self-awareness. Having self-consciousness means having the ability to express ecological selfhood by referring to oneself using the personal pronoun 'I'. This is the historical moment, where mankind made a conceptual, self-referential move and separated itself from the animal reign. Following Locke, I shall call such self-conscious beings *persons*, marked by the symbolically mediated, self-referential observation of being *the same thinking organism* in different times and places. A person is an ecological self that became conscious of its own selfhood. The difference between being an ecological self and being a self-conscious ecological self lies in *having a conceptual notion* of one's identity. In addition, as was demonstrated in the section on psychological identity, self-consciousness has to be accompanied by a properly working memory in order to establish and recognise temporal sameness.

As I noted in section 1 an animal, although having ecological self-awareness (i.e. it experiences its organism from within, knowing its boundaries and struggling to persist in its existence), cannot take a reflective stance towards itself. It is not conscious of itself qua self. This latter, reflective conception of selfhood is how we should grasp not only Locke's notion of personhood, but also Descartes' *cogito*, and even Kant's transcendental-subjectivistic concept of the 'I'.[32] Ultimately, despite the big differences in their philosophical systems, they all try to grab conceptual hold of this identity determining experience of selfhood, which I deciphered as self-reflective ecological self-awareness. Although concepts as 'self' or 'I' are reflexive concepts, and as such products of our thinking activity - there is no such thing as a 'self' out there in nature, it

[32] In postmodern literature, the subject has frequently been declared to have 'deceased'. What is proven though, are the mobile and heterogeneous origins of subjectivity, not its non-existence. At the very most, it is a Cartesian type of subjectivity that is no longer tenable. "But even supposing that I am nothing more than some package of socially responsive roles, I am still something rather than nothing. So the argument hardly establishes the death of the subject; it simply makes the subject a social construction all the way down. But houses are completely constructed, and they exist. Being constructed hardly makes something into nothing. Usually it is the other way around" (Flanagan 1996: 7).

exists only in my imagination or utterance (I will address this point at the end of this section) – those concepts still refer to the undeniably real, self-referential experience of staying the same self-conscious being. In my opinion this is what ultimately accounts for our sense of identity.

Recapitulating, we can conclude that the experience of self-identity is caused by the combination of a relatively stable bodily shape, ecological selfhood, self-consciousness and having a properly working memory. Although these four constituents may be the *necessary conditions* for undergoing an experience of identity, we all know from our day-to-day lives that there is a whole lot more to it. We don not walk around indulging ourselves in being self-conscious ecological selves. The way identity usually comes to the fore is in the guise of *personal identity*.

1.5.2 Personal identity

Analogous to the distinction I made earlier between self-identity and personal identity, we can state that personal identity consists of all the self-descriptive attributes a person gathers in symbolically expressing her identity after reflecting on it. Personal identity is the versatile answer that is invoked when we are being asked for our identity. So the rather formal, inexpressible sense of always being oneself, now becomes tangible by adding to it a symbolically mediated composition of all the bodily features, opinions, desires, tempers, hobbies and so forth people are used to talk about when investigating into their identities. Returning to the initial, examplary meditation introducing this chapter that caused all this conceptual nitpicking, we can now add the insight that the continuous thoughts that are in my mind, and the desires I cherish, my memories, emotional response patterns and future plans, all account for a large part for my sensation of still being the same person when I wake up in the morning. On consecutive days I not only have the same ecological, but also a similar *moral and psychological* outlook on the world. It is highly likely that the food I liked yesterday is still the preferred one today, the beliefs I held yesterday are still part of my convictions today, and the slight panic I always used to suffer from when confronting a group of people, will probably be there too.

So here the aformentioned hermeneutic philosopher would have a strong case in arguing that my moods and my life's history have a great impact on my way of being-in-the-world. We have to keep in mind though that these traits remain contingent and constitute variable features with respect to our fundamental sense of self-identity. As shown on a couple of earlier occasions along the text, these circumstancial conditions may change. They form an integral part of my identity, exacerbate my experience of being the same person, but are not its essential prerequisitions. My character may change, yet I remain. I may experience severe disruptions in my biography, but it is still *my* life. The particular thoughts and desires that make up my mind on evenings before I go to sleep surely attribute to my sense of identity when waking up in the morning, but they could have been different thoughts and it would still be me waking up. On the other hand, I cannot shed off my unique, ecological outlook on the world. I cannot but wake up as myself. If not, there would be no identity any longer.

Even if I am deeply convinced of having become another person over the course of time, this personality change will occur on the level of my *personal identity*. As long as I talk of those changes as *mine*, *my self-identity* persists. Something deeper remains, garanteeing that all those different moments, beliefs and personality traits belong to the same human being. Of course, both self-identity and personal identity are necessary to having a complete experience of *human identity*. Without personality traits or free will a human would be reduced to an automaton, hardly worth being called human any longer.

A paradox frequently occurring in this kind of situations is that changes on the level of personal identity can be so radical, that a person declares *herself* to have become *another person*. Apparently, self-identity and personal identity can diverge. The primary and the secundary reflection on identity – as I called them in section 1 – can have different outcomes: whereas the primary reflection leads – *ceteris paribus*, that is, under conditions of physical health – to the ongoing experience of selfhood, the outcome of the secundary reflection can differ from day to day. My life's course or my beliefs sometimes change over night. We are all familiar with the surging culture of self-help therapies, where people try to change *themselves* for the better. Or just consider the situation we are all in, of playing multiple social roles, that all call for different modes of conduct. Yet no one gets thrown into a crisis of self-identity because

of the roles she plays. (A crisis on the level *personal identity* on the other hand is a frequently occurring nuisance!)

A concomitant paradox lies therein, that forgotten experiences at the same time *do* and *do not* belong to my identity. The things I have forgotten do not partake in my current personal identity, since that requires consciously expressable features, but *have played* a role in its formation. They have been erased from my active and conscious recollection, but they still partially caused me to become what and who I am today.

Generally, when asking for the *idem* of human identity, we can distinguish *two main elements of sameness*. The first one is the invariable experience of *self-identity*. The second one, *personal identity*, comprises the variable dimensions made up of physical aspects, personality, morality and biography. In this light, I shall now define personal identity in this research as *the symbolic self-description by which a person strives for self-understanding, which expresses both her uniqueness and sameness over time, simultaneously providing her life with a moral framework*.[33] Therefore, whenever I designate someone as a *person* from now on, I take her for a human being who is conscious of her identity and is able to express this by means of a self-description. The next chapter will address the question of how we construct these self-*descriptions*. We will see that Paul Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity provides an adequate answer to that question.

1.5.3 The 'self'

Before concluding this section I would like to make a few comments on the use of the word 'self'. As a result of both the discovery of the subject as epistemological foundation of reality, and the Romantic 'turn inward' towards a conception of the self as a stable, psychological core of identity, "we naturally came to think that we have

[33] This definition implies that only known identity traits are part of our identity. I deliberately chose to leave unconscious traits such as habitual behaviour or psychological characteristics that remain concealed to their bearer aside, because this research project is mainly concerned with *expressions* of identity. So, features that are visible only to the outsider, become relevant as soon as they enter the stages of consciousness. Apart fom that, it goes without saying that a self-description is not being fomulated in isolation, but all the social interactions a person engages in affect the content of her personal identity. A description someone else gives of a person, for example, that differs from her own may cause her to change her self-image or her behaviour.

selves the way we have heads or arms, and inner depths the way we have hearts or livers, as a matter of hard, interpretation-free fact" (Taylor 1989: 112). This was a revolutionary step in the history of the philosophy of mind. Before that, the Greeks did certainly know a 'care for the self', which implied looking after one's moral and physical health, "but this is not at all the same as making 'self' into a noun, preceded by a definite or indefinite article, speaking of 'the' self, or 'a' self. This reflects something important which is peculiar to our modern sense of agency" (Ibid: 113).

Although the Greeks did discern a capacity to reflect (logos, nous), they did not have a notion of a spiritual center of all thinking activity, located somewhere in the head. The self was not conceived as a spiritual *deus in machina*, reigning over bodily movements, like we saw in the Cartesian view. Body and soul together built an indivisible unity: "Snell remarked on the absence in Homer of words that could happily be translated by our 'mind', or even by 'soul' in its standard post-Platonic meaning, that is, a term designating the unique locus where all our different thoughts and feelings occur. Homeric *psyche* seems to designate something like the life force in us, what flees from the body at death, rather than the site of thinking and feeling" (Ibid: 118). The modern notion of a rational subject, tucked away somewhere in the head, did not exist in the Hellenistic-Christian universe, when human (small) reason was considered a faint reflection of the (big) Reason, the cosmos or God in its unfathomable tracks.

Descartes' philosophy heralded the history of reifying this animistic concept of selfhood into the self as a fixed, autonomously existing entity. Rightly so, this view of the self as a *substantivum* has been criticised right from the start on. No other than David Hume called the self a fiction, a mere idea within the ongoing stream of impressions. Recently Daniel Dennett made the same sort of comment when asking: "Or is the very idea of a self nothing but a compelling fiction, a creed outworn, as some theorists insist, a myth we keep telling ourselves in spite of the advances of science that discredit it?" (Dennett, in: Kolak and Martin 1991: 355). In his article *The self as a center of narrative gravity,* he even compares it to an object's (virtual) center of gravity.[34] But how should we look upon the self then?

I propose considering the self as a construction of reflection, a concept that reflexively denotes the subject that reflects upon its identity. Selfhood does not refer to some

[34] This comparison suffers from the defect that a stone does not experience gravity, gravity is a humanly concept, whereas identity is a reality, strongly and uniquely experienced by its subject.

substantial core within me, but to the identity of the organism I am, as opposed to all the other things I am not. It always implies some sort of reflexive relation of a thinking being towards it*self*[35] in its differences from other things. Notice that outside philosophy and psychology the word 'self' is never used in isolation, but always in compositions, such as myself, herself, self-knowledge, or self-consciousness. Adding the prefix 'self' lends a word reciprocity. In case of human beings, one could purport that selfhood arises the moment a person becomes conscious of her identity, that is, conscious of her own peculiar character, dissimilar to that of others. Therefore, whenever authors speak about the 'construction of self', I would suggest speaking of the construction of 'identity' instead, as to avoid smuggling in an erroneous, hypostatizing conception of selfhood.

1.5.4 Conclusion: identity

The question 'who am I?' is a kind of question human beings (fortunately) do not ask themselves every day. Life would become utterly unlivable if we did. If it is risen at all, then typically at what Anthony Giddens poignantly called *fateful moments*: when planning your career after graduation, following the (far too early) death of a close friend, or maybe by gaining unexpected insights while reading a controversial novel (Cf. Giddens 1991: 112).

Although on this existential level the question after identity might seem a nuisance rather than a blessing, on a quotidian basis we cannot dispose of it: "Levels of concern about identity may wax and wane, but, whether individually or collectively, we can't live routine lives as humans without identification, without knowing who we are and who others are. This is true no matter where we are, or what the local way of life or language. Without repertoires of identification we would not be able to relate to each other meaningfully consistently. We would not have the vital sense of who's who and what's what. Without identity there could be no human world" (Jenkins 2004: 7).

What, now, are the results of this first chapter as far as understanding this obviously vital phenomenon of identity is concerned? What *is* identity? The chapter yielded two

[35] One cannot but speak tautologically about the self, since we have no alternative concept to indicate what is meant.

important seeds, that we will witness becoming fruits in the next chapters. First of all, winding through the text like a pervading current, there is the insight that all identity is built out of elements of *sameness* and *difference*. The elements of sameness I discerned earlier in this section not only cause temporal continuity, but also provide criteria to distinguish between persons. A person's opinion on politics, for example, gives both a sense of similarity over time, and distinguishes her from others' political stances. Jenkins aptly summarizes this aspect of identity: "Identity is a matter of knowing who's who. It is the systematic establishment and signification, between individuals, between collectivities, and between indviduals and collectivities, of relationships of similarity and difference" (Jenkins 2004: 5). The identity of things and persons always serves both ends: it unites and divides.

Secondly, from the text we can deduce as a bottom line fact that all identity is about (in)formation. As I boldly stated in section four: the I is pure form.[36] Despite the fact that all matter is constantly in motion, on all levels of existence some sort of identity persists. Material particles are indiscriminative; it is their form that renders them recognisable and distinguishable. Information is nothing else than formed or coded matter. Like we saw as well, this formative principle can be caught in our DNA, the construction chart of a dinner table, or a written text. Somehow, all those material, elementary particles become infused with a certain form and end up as identifyable 'things'. On an intersubjective level it is the principle of information conveyance that safeguards meaningful relationships between people: ranging from collective memories, traditions and the handing down of knowledge to the existence of group identities. The subsequent two chapters address these last aspects of human identity.

[36] See 1.4.2

Chapter 2
Narrative identity

Today, though, 'identity' is 'the loudest talk in town',
The burning issue on everybody's mind and tongue.
Zygmunt Bauman

Where first chapter was mainly concerned with the experience and foundations of *self-identity*, I will now pick up the issue I ended with: how do we construct our self-descriptions? What is the mechanism behind the formation of personal identities as I defined them? How do we know ourselves? One of the recent theories on identity particularly appropriate to answer this question, which – not surprisingly – enjoys popularity among scholars, is Paul Ricoeur's theory of *narrative identity*. Methodologically, we could deem Ricoeur's theory of narrative identity a *meta-theory*: it provides with an insight into the methods of identity construction. The essence of it seems very straightforward: how do we achieve self-understanding? By telling stories, Ricoeur postulates. Of course, it is not *that* simple. Let us have a closer look.

2.1 The ipse and the idem

The philosophy of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur can be seen as the long detour of the contemporaneous subject, which after its crisis endeavours to recover itself. His philosophy could be characterized as the laborious search for the complex identity of the ego, in a state of permanent change (Cf. Perone 1998: 16-7). In the end, though, Ricoeur's cause is an ethical one. From the claws of its modern and postmodern critics, he tries to save a subject that withstands the trial of moralistic imputation and can consequently be held responsible for its actions.

For more than two centuries the subject had been subjected to fierce, debilitating assaults, ranging from Hume's relegation of the subject to an ephemeral impression, via Nietzsche declaring the subject a grammatical fiction, to Foucault's analyses of the subject as a product of disciplinatory practices. Outside philosophy the crisis of the subject had been exacerbated by attacks from various directions: whether by reductive explanations of psychic phenomena in natural sciences, by the disempowering of the conscious ego in psychoanalysis, or by the cultural constructivism in social sciences, to mention just a couple of them.

In response, Ricoeur aims at founding a novel concept of subjectivity that withstands all the sceptical challenges it faced and that regains enough solidity and self-constancy to bear responsibility for its actions. In order to do so Ricoeur does not revert to a unitary, oldfashioned, metaphysical concept of subjectivity, but he instead provides us with a theory of subjectivity which lends the subject a *narrative unity*, thereby underscoring its hermeneutical and mobile nature. The concept of *narrative* identity is not a devise of Ricoeur himself; it had been in vogue in, for example, psychology before he introduced it in philosophical discourse. Still, it represents an honest attempt by Ricoeur to retrieve some sort of ethical subject from its beleaguers.

In his major work on identity, *Oneself as another,* Ricoeur takes us on a dazzling, conceptual rollercoaster, in a grand synthetic sweep meticulously spelling out the antinomies, dichotomies and pitfalls that every thorough investigation into the nature of human identity is fraught with. Human identity typically encompasses both the reflective experience of *selfhood* – this is where human beings break away from the animalistic reign - and an element of *sameness*. There are traits within our lives that persist in a relatively unchanging (or better: slowly changing) fashion over time, and simultaneously we experience those traits on all occasions as being *ours*. The sixty-four-thousand dollar question now is, not only in Ricoeurian philosophy but in all research on human identity, what ultimately accounts for this experience of selfhood? What causes the sameness in the experience of selfhood? Why is it that it will doubtlessly be *me* waking up tomorrow morning? The same question that guided us through the first chapter.

From phenomenology Ricoeur adopts the concept of *ipseity* to indicate this basic experience of selfhood. It is because of the element of *sameness* in our experience of *selfhood*, that Ricoeur is able to pin down the discourse on identity to the underlying

framework of the dialectic of *idem* and *ipse*. Idem-identity, or sameness, therefore is always two-folded: it refers for one to a person staying the same self (ipseity) over the course of time, but equally to the set of lasting dispositions and other characteristics that are being recognised in the process of self-understanding and the expression of identities. The idem-identity comprises the 'linguistic, practical, narrative, and ethico-moral objectivities of identity' (Venema 2000: 128). Since the *ipse* and the *idem* are aspects of one and the same subject and on an ordinary level of self-perception will not even be told apart – after all there is just one *me*, I *am* my characteristics! -, the question is raised how both of them converge? That which stays the same in our complex experience of identity is the mystery-guest whose cover Ricoeur tries to blow. Does he succeed herein?

The concept of *ipse* not only represents the capacity of appropriation (Jemeinigkeit[37]) of experiences, but also reveals the locus of human freedom. Ricoeur's analysis of identity and his ethical aspirations coalesce in the capacity of the subject to take a reflexive stance towards its thoughts and actions. Compare it to what Kant labelled the *transcendental cogito*: in everything I do there is always the accompanying knowledge of 'me' doing or thinking so. The 'I' becomes a kind of infinitely regressing, unifying mediator amidst the various contents of my impressions.

In Kant's transcendental-philosophical system, we can distinguish two types of subjectivity. First, there is the subject in a sense of the whole cognitive apparatus, *a priori* given, preceding all perceptions of reality. Additionally there is the transcendental subject, which is an *a posteriori* product of the thinking activity of the subject. The transcendental subject – or *transcendental unity of apperception* – is a presumption introduced to guarantee the identity of consciousness. It may come as a surprise to the reader, but Kant too is primarily a philosopher in search of the basis of human identity. The question after the identity of the subject lies at the heart of his transcendental critique. This is the case for two main reasons. First, the I – apprehended as *transcendental unity of apperception* – is what unites all aspects of a thinking subject, i.e. all ideas, impressions, desires, sensations, into *one consciousness*. Everything popping up in my head can be accompanied by the reflexive thought of 'I think'. They are always *my* impressions. So, the transcendental subject, the *ego cogito*, gives identity to the multiple contents of my consciousness. Second, in Kant's point of

[37] For an explanation of the concept of 'jemeinigkeit' see Heidegger 1993: 42

view, the cognitive apparatus is universal and unchanging. A view that would be severely critized by Wilhelm Dilthey in the nineteenth century.[38]

Therefore, Descartes, Locke and Kant were very similar in their attempt to discover the *idem* of human identity. All three of them searched for the lasting principle – behind or within – our stream of conscious thoughts. According to Descartes this was a substantial, autonomous ego; to Locke it was a self-conscious consciousness, and to Kant it was a transcendental unity of apperception. In their own way, they all tried to grasp the first-person experience of staying the same human being.

By virtue of the mentioned ability to pull back, to reflectively acknowledge my experiences as *mine*, I am able to evaluate and, if wished for, to intervene in them. As an *ipse*, it is within my range of capabilities to either undertake actions freely or abstain from them. Ricoeur sees human beings through dichotomizing, Kantian glasses: on the one hand we belong to the phenomenal world, tied to a corps subjected to the laws of nature; on the other hand we take part in the noumenal world of autonomously acting, thinking beings, equipped to initiate a natural chain of events. That is the reason of an ingrained schizophrenia every human being has to deal with: when feeling the bodily sensation of hunger for example, like any other animal does, I may nonetheless decide not to obey the signal, watch my weight instead and defy my aching belly. It is exactly because of this freedom, and the fact that there is a large degree of *sameness* to this *ipseity*, that we can hold people responsible for their past and present actions. Ricoeur places the load of responsibility of the acting subject on this particular self-constancy.

2.2 Updating Ricoeur's theory

But does Ricoeur offer a sufficient explanation of this self-constancy? What is it according to him that is *constant* over time? Here Ricoeur gets caught up in an

[38] Subjectivity implies doubling oneself virtually: whenever reflecting upon herself a person becomes conscious of herself qua … . Next to the two types of subjectivity mentioned above, other types of subjectivity can reach awareness in this act of self-reflection. I can become aware of myself qua epistemological subject (frankly what Kant was after), ontological subject (think of Hegels idealism), socio-political subject (as civilian, laborer or legal body) or psychological subject (as feeling and desiring person).

irreparable contradiction. Ricoeur defines this subjectivity exclusively in terms of narrative identity (See: Ricoeur, in Wood 1991: 32). We could formulate the paradox like this: the *ipse* designates the storyteller who is described by the very story he tells. Elsewhere he declares: "Precisely as second nature, my character is me, myself, *ipse*; but this *ipse* announces itself as *idem*" (Ricoeur 1994: 121). Ricoeur means by character the following: "Character, I would say today, designates the set of lasting dispositions by which a person is recognised" (Ibid: 121).

In other words, it is the narratively expressible *idem* of our identities that entirely makes up for the constancy of the subject, whereas we just learned that ipseity refers to the typically human feature of being able to always pull back reflectively from our dealings with the world in order to acknowledge them as *ours*. Venema reaches the same conclusion on Ricoeur's substitution of ipse- by idem-identity by remarking: "Self-constancy without sameness is not an option within Ricoeur's understanding of narrative identity" (Venema 2000: 142).

By identifying *idem* and *ipse* in this precise sense, Ricoeur shows a tendency to undermine his on its own very fruitful distinction of *idem* and *ipse*. The *ipse*, the experience of selfhood which perseveres in an unmistakable way and exposes the experiential core of human identity, escapes any symbolically mediated self-description. For one Ricoeur acknowledges the ethical supremacy of ipseity over narrative sameness, but at the same time he tries to define the *sameness within* ipseity in terms of narrative identity.[39] The essential point of introducing the idea of an ipse in the first place, was to show that no matter how much my character, my set of distinctive signs might change, it is still *me*, the same subject, underlying and bearing those characteristics.

In his work *Subjectivity and selfhood*, Dan Zahavi too criticizes Ricoeur on his failure of presupposing a distinct *core self*: "… the experiential approach, primarily defended by Husserl and Henry, insists that an investigation of the self must necessarily involve the first-person perspective and ultimately conceives of the self as the *invariant* dimension of first-personal givenness within the multitude of changing experiences. […] I argue that the experiential notion of a core or minimal self is both more

[39] One can find spots in Ricoeur's text where he *does* stick to his distinction of *idem* and *ipse*, for example, when he explains ipseity by referring to performative (speech) acts, such as making a promise. In this case, keeping a promise is constitutive of a person's sameness over time. Ricoeur sees it as 'another model of permanence in time besides that of character (Ricoeur 1994: 123).

fundamental than and a presupposition of the narrative self" (Zahavi 2005: 8). A subject therefore cannot use that which is the product of a self-reflective act, its narrative self-image, to fully explain the constancy of the *agens* of reflection, the *ipse*, that which always flees description and in its flight refers to something fundamental beneath. So, simultaneously, Ricoeur uses the concept of *ipse* as common ground and integrator of all the aspects that pertain to the narrative sameness of a person, but defines this subjectivity in terms of narrative identity. This seems logically inconsistent to me. We now see why Ricoeur called his work 'oneself as *another'*: we cannot but identify ourselves using a symbolic self-image that because of its universalising, linguistic nature cuts out the idiosyncratic, experiential core of identity. We never fully coincide with our articulated identity, it always remains somewhat *strange* to who we are on a self-experiential basis.

Obviously, the kind of reasoning deployed by Ricoeur does not hold firm ground. Ironically, Ricoeur fails to grasp the concept of ipse properly, after proudly introducing it as the aspect of identity mostly overseen by its investigators. But how then should we grasp the *ipse*? It should have become clear by now that what Ricoeur calls the *ipse* refers to the experience of identity I termed *ecological selfhood*. Only on a few occasions does Ricoeur brush against such a corporeal conception of *ipseity*, mentioning our *corporeal anchoring* in the world, yet failing to move on to the just conclusions, for example when connecting identity to ".. an invariant, our corporeal condition experienced as the existential mediation between the self and the world" (Ricoeur 1994: 150).

Another highly questionable feature of the theory of narrative identity is whether its core-concept of narrativity is the proper one to describe identity in the first place. Although the theory of narrative identity pretends to encompass the whole range of aspects that adhere to the complex of human identities, one can argue whether a *narrative* is needed to fill the gap of a lacking self-understanding. Remember the example of Theresa, our 33 year old friend from Boston. The fictitious self-description I provided there, which I think is close to how people actually depict themselves, shows very little narrative elements. An enumeration of traits is not yet a story. It is very striking that in *Oneself as Another* we do not even come across one concrete example taken from non-fictitious, ordinary life, that supports how the principle of narrative identity formation works.

In my opinion this is for good reasons: Ricoeur's failure to provide examples might point at some deficiencies in his theorizing. People's identities cannot be equated with narratives. Ask anyone on the street for his identity, and you will not get a lineair, classical narrative as an answer. The answer may contain some narrative elements – below I will have a closer look into these – but will first and foremost be a rather random list of personal characteristics. Narrativity in the Ricoeurian sense only enters the picture when people actively think of their biographies. By stressing the narrative dimension of identity formation there is an inherent preponderance of biographical experiences in Ricoeur's theory at the expense of less 'narrative' identity traits, such as body features and our psychological make-up. In underscoring the necessity of 'mythical homogenisation'[40] Ricoeur is in constant danger of neglecting crucial aspects of our identities and restricting them to our mere life stories. As shown in the previous chapter there is a whole lot more to it. Therefore I would suggest speaking of identity in terms of a *self-description with narrative elements*, instead of narrative identity.

2.3 The power of narratives

Of course, the theory of narrative identity not only provokes critique. I would do Ricoeur no justice in creating the appearance that there are but dark tones in his philosophical scores, whereas there is fortunately also a lot of bright music in the air. Let me therefore in this section enumerate a couple of fruit-bearing insights the theory produced. First of all, the segregation of the concept of identity into an *ipse*- and an *idem*-pole provides us with a very suitable toolkit to analyse the phenomenon of human identity from a first-person perspective. Although Ricoeur failed to grasp the concept of *ipse* properly, it does in itself constitute a very important contribution to the discussion on human identity.

Second, as far as our self-image contains biographical elements, they will very likely be of narrative nature. That is, they will bear the traits of spatiotemporal concordance and homogeneity as Ricoeur describes them in his book. We have to keep in mind,

[40] 'Mythical' refers to the Aristotelian conception of *muthos* as emplotment, that is, the ordering of a story's timely scattered events into a temporally unified whole consisting of a clear cut beginning, middle and end.

though, that our identity does not coincide with our biography, even if we are using knowledge of our own past as a key to decipher our current identity, but that our life story is just one aspect of the entire picture. The same goes for Ricoeur's assumption of there being a *unified plot*, in which several character traits and experiences are synthesized into a homogeneous and coherent life story. It is a conception of identity that is not necessarily in line with how identities are actually composed. Identities rather are mosaics of traits that often do not correlate with each other. One might consider a *pictorial* instead of a narrative metaphor to describe identity formation.

Nonetheless, we should grant Ricoeur that in most cases people *will try* to present their identities as monolithically as possible. In the self-image we create, the identity expressed will tend to forge as many discordances as possible into the drawn coherence, even the ruptures purposely elucidated, like the sudden career move one made, will play a meaningful part in the overarching 'plot'. (For example by showing one's proficiency in seizing opportunities in this case.)

Third, Ricoeur is right in claiming that we take our moral orientation from stories, which in one way or another have withstood the ravages of time, be it the bible or romantic ideas on love being hurled down at us in TV commercials. Although the majority of the world population does not partake in the literary tradition Ricoeur presupposes – it is estimated only 6 % of the population in the West reads literature – these stories, incarnated in novels, films, told tales, soaps, college books, ethical treatises and what more there is, are still the vehicles of our body of ideas. One does not have to read the corresponding novels to be familiar with Werther's *Weltschmerz*, Hans Castorp's boredom, or Raskolnikov's remorse. As Ricoeur writes himself: ".. the work of imagination does not come out of nowhere. It is tied in one way or another to the models handed down by tradition" (Ricoeur, in Wood 1991: 25).

Borrowing a concept from Gadamer, we could circumscribe the development of moral stances as a 'fusion of horizons', in which stories handed down by tradition are appropriated in such a way as to yield an individual's unique perspective on life. Persons always extract the content of their identities from already available and pervading 'symbolic resources'. "We may relate to the notion of disposition as the set of *acquired identifications* by which the other enters into the composition of the same. To a large extent, in fact, the identity of a person or a community is made up of these identifications with values, norms, ideals, models, and heroes, *in* which the person or

community recognises itself" (Ricoeur 1994: 121). Or, as Charles Taylor writes: "The full definition of someone's identity usually involves not only his stand on moral and spiritual matters but also some reference to a defining community" (Taylor 1989: 36). Hitherto, I treated the subject matter rather isolated, as if we were all Robinson Crusoes. Of course we too have our Fridays. In fact, we have a whole week! It goes without saying that a substantial part of any personal identity is composed by elements a person shares with other members of the groups she engages in. As I stated in the first chapter: identity is sameness and difference at the same time. Having an identity means both distinction from and identification with groups of other people. Collective identity is the experience of sameness between individuals, to be part of a greater whole. As a group they distinguish themselves from other groups. In section 6 I elaborate on the social origins of personal identity.

The groups persons engage in are seldom a choice of their own. We write the stories of our lives only to a very limited degree ourselves. At birth already, every one of us is thrown into a non-chosen group: a nation, a village, a language community, a social milieu, a family: "Precisely because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historic and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally constituted unity – an 'identity' in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation)" (Gay, Evans, Redman 2004: 17). In this sense, all personal identities are culturally biased: the cultural heritage handed down to me determines the nature and scope of the story I can tell: someone raised in a poor African region, or someone severely traumatized in her youth, will offer a completely different account of who she is compared to, for example, the spoiled Western teenager I was. The theory of narrative identity formation shows how within the dialectics of self and other, persons and groups, biology and culture, the homogeneous and the heterogeneous, those cultural forces are integrated into the story of one's personal identity.[41]

[41] It might be useful to add a comment on the use of the words cultural identity and group identity. Since it needs no arguing that *all identities* are cultural identities, the opposition of personal identity versus cultural identity becomes meaningless. I will therefore speak of personal identity as opposed to *collective* or *group* identity.

A fourth and final advantage of the theory I would like to emphasise, lies in its stress on the mediated nature of human identity. The initial question of this chapter read: how do persons construct their self-descriptions? What is the procedure behind the formation and expression of personal identity? The theory of narrative identity aptly shows the manifold mediations that are inherent to every such construction. To quote Ricoeur himself: "...the self does not know itself immediately, but only indirectly by the detour of the cultural signs of all sorts which are articulated in the symbolic mediations which always already articulate action and, among them, the narratives of everyday life" (Ricoeur, in Wood 1991: 198). Narratives play a role in the process of self-reflection, we relate to others by their and our own stories, and by virtue of narratives we relate to the world and we embed ourselves in the *grand narratives* of cultures, politics, religions and other moral frames of reference.

The concept of identities as embedded in narrative structures, clearly indicates that even presumed 'facts' are always subjected to interpretation and sensitive to the context of formation. Because of his dissimilar life story to mine, for example, my friend whom I spent my summer holiday with may very well reflect on it in an entirely different way than I do, although we factually did exactly the same things during our two-week stay. Ricoeur demonstrates how we always forge our self-descriptions against the background of narrative prefigurations (Cf. De Mul 2010: 205-7). We are prone to explain the happenings in our lives according to the logic we encounter in stories. So we rather explain our actions by referring to rational motives, intentions and future plans, than by Pavlovian stimulus-respons models. That is what Ricoeur meant when he wrote that we live our 'lives in quest of narrative': we build our self-descriptions in the shape of meaningful, coherent stories and draw their content from narratively structured storages. Furthermore, narratives enable an author to link past, present and future actions, by giving past happenings a determined place in the courses of our lives and shed light on planned future actions from thereon. The stories we tell about ourselves – both *to* ourselves and to others – give a firm but mobile structure to our lives. Yet, they may be the cause of slight discomforts as well. Stories can have the somewhat embarrassing capacity to function as a mirror, eliciting traits that dwelled subconsciously up until the point of reading the story. They force their readers or listeners into taking a different stance towards things, to change perspectives, to look upon oneself with a foreign gaze. As we all know from experience, stories – whether

books, movies or the judgement of a close friend – bear the disturbing capacity of making the repressed, the unseen, the unconscious painfully conscious.

2.4 Self-descriptions vs self-constructions

"A man's character is discernible in the mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says: "This is the real me!""

William James in a letter to his wife

There is one last flaw in Ricoeur's theory I would like to highlight. According to Ricoeur identities are being constructed in the stories told about them. He describes the procedure in the following way: "The narrative constructs the identity of the character, what can be called his or her narrative identity, in constructing that of the story told. It is the identity of the story that makes the identity of the character" (Ricoeur 1994: 147-8). Suppose we confine human identity to its *articulated* side, and forget for a moment the above considerations on ipseity, is – in that case – talking of identity in terms of a *construction* an adequate description of how identities are being looked upon by their bearers? It goes without saying identities that *are* being constructed[42], but let me take the first-person perspective and ask: do we autophenomenologically perceive identities as *constructions* or rather as *self-descriptions*? Do we actively construct identities during the descriptive process or do we regard this self-description as a revelation of an identity that was already there, waiting to be discovered and articulated?

We may be able to express our identity in multiple ways, but we are certainly not free in constructing just any identity arbitrarily. If I refer to myself as a muscular, well-dressed, outgoing playboy, whereas in reality I am a boring, ill-tasted and shy scientist, then it is obvious – both for me and my interlocutors – that I am not offering a credible account of who I truly am. So the margin of variation, the amount of construction at

[42] To discern just a couple of *constructive moments* in the nascent stages of identity formation: one could think of parental genetic material, upbringing, education, social interactions and cultural forces.

mercy of the self-depicting subject, is actually fairly small. Even if it holds true that personal identities come into being and are being developed *only* by means of their expression, there being no identity apart from the one expressed, then the fact nonetheless remains that *on the level of self-conception* this will not be experienced as a *construction*, but as a self-description.

At any given moment in time I am not free in choosing who I want to be: I *have* an identity. If someone asks me who I am, I will try to offer him a *true* representation of my identity. If I do not and, for example, purposely distort my biography, I will be telling an obvious lie and give a false account of my identity. My identity will surely change, I influence it by making life decisions, I may choose to *work on myself*, but even in the latter case this presupposes an understanding of who I *am* – my idem-identity – and who I want to *become*. It is hard to imagine a situation of a person sitting down on a chair thinking: 'Let me now construct an identity.' That person probably thinks: 'who am I?' and she consequently, in an act of self-analysis, tries to answer this question and make sense of herself. This will be seen, though, as a way of making the unconscious conscious: not as constructing an identity from scratch.[43]

Certain features are already present, such as body traits, a certain character, hard facts like age, nationality, address; features that may be subjected to interpretation, but as such are fixed. We are bound to several biological, psychological and biographical limitations when describing ourselves. An atheistic person, for example, will not change her religious preferences at random; her agnosticism is a pervading feature throughout all the social roles she engages in, although her stance may become evaluated differently depending on the situation at hand. Our nationality and all that goes with it, national symbols, language, ethnic origins, geography; they all play a part in our self-images. The corpus of ideas a person gets exposed to is highly dependent on coincidence: the teachers she finds at school, the books she happens to read, the friends she meets, or even the documentary on the Discovery Channel she accidentally zaps into. But also a feature as basic as our moods is largely outside our reach, yet it has a tremendously important effect on our worldview and self-esteem.

[43] I have to admit that probably only the most honest of all persons represents herself in a completely truthful manner. Socially it is perfectly common to present oneself in a positive and desirable fashion. As soon as a person starts thinking about her self-presentation, this will reciprocally influence her identity, via what others think of her, or by actually adopting this particular kind of behaviour. In this sense, the difference between self-description and the construction of identity is not as black and white as the text above might suggest. In every moment of description there is an element of construction involved.

The constructive powers of persons themselves are rather *indirect* ones. By choosing a certain lifestyle, by choosing friends, a place to live, a job, people make decisions that thereafter will have an impact on their identities. I cannot simply decide any day to become someone else. But I may decide to behave differently and put question marks at the paradigms I used to live by, thus slowly transforming my identity as a result. Therefore, though in expressing an identity there is an act of construction involved, I would still prefer speaking of identity in terms of an *experience* and *expression of identity* instead of *construction*. Ricoeur himself admits this when writing: "We can become our own narrator ... without being able to become the author" (Ricoeur, in Wood 1991: 32).

It is true, of course, that persons construct their lives. But even in the extreme case of adopting a new lifestyle, a person will probably do this because she is convinced of having led the wrong, alienated life up until that point. I don not become a Hells-angel, I always was one! I just did not know it. Do we not all know this feeling of *being at home* in certain activities? Have we not all once experienced a groundbreaking episode in our lives that gave us the joyful sensation of *truly being ourselves*? Identity remains something persons *find*, not *invent*. People *live* their lives, but have *identities*. Identities are developed along the line. People do not construct an identity from scratch. Until some sort of critical consciousness springs during puberty, children and adolescents are completely constructed by language and the ideas that are being imposed on them by parents, teachers, friends and media. Even our personality is something that to a large degree has been infused to us genetically by our parents and since then stood under a constant bombardment of impinging social forces. As Ricoeur purports repeatedly: we are not the sole authors of our lives.

It has to be said, however, that every description involves interpretation and therefore contains an element of construction. Objective, value-free self-descriptions do not exist: we always see ourselves through a certain lens: we are constrained to use a particular language, are informed in a certain way, describe ourselves within a social setting, we may feel the need to give a socially desirable self-description, etcetera. Therefore, instead of opposing constructions and descriptions of identity diametrically, it would be more appropriate to see them as ends of a gradual scale.

2.5 Does identity matter?

This may be the appropriate moment to raise some questions on the importance of the matter altogether. On a day-to-day basis we cannot do without the identification of persons and objects. Yet, this is something different from the self-reflexive search for identity philosophers are prone to speak of. One might doubt whether on this ethico-existential level identity constitutes a major issue in the lives of people. For sure there are moments in people's lives when their identity becomes problematic: during a juvenile phase of rebellion this might happen, during other 'fateful moments' (Giddens 1991: 112) in life: when forced into exile, or maybe even on a foreign holiday whilst being confronted with different views and behavioural patterns. Yet such fateful moments – be it puberty, the choice of occupation, the death of our parents, or menopause – are the exception rather than the rule. Someone continuously digging into his identity will probably end up in a mental institution very soon. As Glover observes correctly: "It may seem that self-creation is something only a few people care about. [...] Most of us do not spend our lives on endless landscape-gardening of the self. Many of us lead rather undramatic lives. The identity we create is often shaped, not by some heroic struggle, but through our choice of partners and friends, by the job we choose, and by where we decide to live" (Glover 1988: 132). Seemingly, Glover too advocates the view I expressed above; stating that people rather construct their *lives* and not their *identities*, the latter *coming along the line*. Caring for ourselves, having a healthy interest in oneself, does not necessarily imply a conscious dealing with or even constructing of an identity.

Taking up the statement by Glover we might even call into question the *relevance* of people's identities in life. Is it impossible to lead a satisfying life without having a well-articulated and carefully shaped identity? Again, we certainly do make decisions and appropriate ideas that co-shape our identity, but how many of us are doing that *consciously*? Who really carry with them an elaborated, long-term 'life plan'?[44] Even the often heard diagnosis of our culture being in a 'crisis' of meaning, involving the

[44] It has to be said that on a micro-, day-to-day level people are making decisions all the time and they are planning their lives ahead. One could purport that daily activities such as buying clothes, reading a book or adorning one's house are all moments that call for self-reflection. This may not be the highly existential type of questioning Giddens refers to, but it still concerns matters that require self-reflection and the conscious expression of identities. Identities do not *only* come to the fore at fateful moments, but are a constant, be it often implicit, part of the fabric of daily life.

loss of widespread patterns of identification and a supposed lack of morals, does obviously not prompt people to anxiously replace their lost identities by new ones.

Equally, a brief moment of anxiety or indecisiveness about where to go in life is by far not the same as a profound loss of identity. The referential patterns persons use in order to understand themselves and take a stance in life – in short: their moral orientation – turn out to be the mobile outcome of a rather slow process of shifting worldviews and preferences instead of the active *formation* of new identities on short notice. A youngster in the latter stages of high school, not knowing what university study to choose, may have a firm identity, but just hasn't found the right education yet. To repeat it once more: the majority of human beings simply lead their lives, at best at certain existential crossroads reflecting upon themselves and discovering that over the course of their lives their identity has changed. It is certainly true that we 'late modernists' live in a culture that puts high value in 'being someone', in big career achievements and the development of a wide range of personal skills. The mountain of social virtues persons *have to* climb these days seems sheer unconquerable. But, although some of us may feel miserable now and then and wish for the looks and money of Brad Pitt, it seems to me that most of us have a pretty stable, down to earth understanding of who they are. Luckily, the big identity crises are limited to the unlucky few.

2.6 'Oneself as another'

> The very way we walk, move, gesture, speak is shaped from the earliest moments by our awareness that we appear before others, that we stand in public space, and that this space is potentially one of respect or contempt, of pride or shame.
>
> *Charles Taylor*

Of course, Ricoeur had another, compelling reason in mind to call his book 'oneself as another' than the one I gave earlier. The title expresses one of his core insights, namely that all human identity is infused with otherness. As mentioned in section 2.3, no single person stands in isolation: all identity is formed in interaction with others and is firmly

set against a certain cultural background. In devising his theory of narrative identity formation, Ricoeur tried to open a door for this 'other' to enter the building site where personal identity is constructed. Others appear *in* stories; they tell stories about themselves, about us, about third parties; we share stories with others: with our friends, colleagues and our fellow countrymen. Basically, the difference between our self-images and the images others have of us is a rather analytical one: it is hardly possible to tell the origins of the threads that make up for our self-image apart – whether they are internal or external. The slightest of words, signs or reflexes of others invite us to ponder our identity: 'why did my friend pull a disgustful face for a second? Is there something the matter with how I behaved?' As Richard Jenkins puts it: "Your external definition of me is an inexorable part of my internal definition of myself – even if I only reject or resist it – and *vice versa*" (Jenkins 2004: 25).

Recall from section 1.4 that even on the most elementary of levels selfhood already is mediated. An organism is negatively defined by its environment: it ends where otherness begins. Selfhood arises thanks to the interaction with other organisms. In their genesis, selfhood and otherness of living creatures are equi-created. That is why phenomenologists are justified in claiming that consciousness always is consciousness *of something*, i.e. tuned to the world – referring to some intentional content outside of itself. From the very first moment we open our eyes, from the instant we leave maternal darkness behind, our eyes are lit by the faces of others. Every word, every thought, every experience we have is put in there by and among others. Socio-evolutionary, the capacity of reading faces turned out important enough to have its own brain mechanism (Cf. Glover 1988: 70). A lot of fundamental, innate capacities do exist of course, such as schemes for bodily development, the acquisition of language, neural learning and intelligent adaptation to environments, but as George Herbert Mead contends: "It is impossible to conceive of a self arising outside of social experience" (Mead 1934: 140).

Identities – by that I mean self-conceptions – are thus constructed within this tension of self-perception qua introspection and what we believe others to think of us. "We use the way other people interpret our behaviour as evidence of who and what we are […] We cannot ignore what kind of persons others are telling us we are; the image of our 'self' is seriously affected, if not created by, the image others have of us" (Livesey 2004: 9). It is important to note that it is not so much what other people actually *say* or how they *do react* to us, but all the more how we *interpret* their actions that leads to

conclusions about ourselves. “The manner in which a man evaluates himself corresponds most closely to what he *believes* people in general think of him and then to what he *believes* those in the temporary group in which he is participating think of him” (Shibutani 2006: 240). Somewhat later on Shibutani explains how relatively fixed identities are established via this process: “It is through the regularity in the responses of other people that man establishes his sense of identity, and this concertino of himself is buttressed and reinforced by the continuation of these expected reactions” (Ibid: 246-7). Even the most stoical of persons cannot escape the influence of others on her self-conception. The stickiness of others’ opinions, mimics and actions is just too strong. We all have to respond to our fellow humans’ conduct somehow. There are degrees of course in the impact different persons have on us. The opinion my partner holds about me outweighs the cynical comments made on my clothes by my colleagues. Because the one is better informed, more important to me or simply more qualified than the other – my physician in medical affairs for example – she will exert more influence on my self-conception.

2.6.1 Roles and situations

If other people obviously have such a massive impact on persons’ identities, what sense then does it make to speak of identity in the singular? Should we not revert to seeing identity as a continuously shifting collage of identit*ies*, as a kind of *perpetuum mobile*, depending on the persons and environments we interact with? Just look at it: at home we are someone different to who we are at work; with my beloved partner I would never speak at the tone I use to address my colleagues. Erving Goffman called this feature (ie. awareness of others and situations and adjusting one’s behaviour to them) ‘role playing’ (See Goffman 1959: 13-82). Any situation calls for another kind of behaviour and invites a person to define her self-image accordingly. Here we see the mechanism I described in the previous paragraph at work: people look at themselves picturing how others would do, think of a performance they want to give and the impression they want to leave, and act according to the codes that apply to that particular situation.

For example, whenever I enter a room, I will do that the way I *believe* to be appropriate and try to anticipate what people already present expect me to do. I present myself in such a way, as to leave the desired impression. Shall I shake their hands? Or just say 'hi'? Do I want to come on strong and head for the buffet immediately or rather act modest and wait for the host to invite me to do so? The particular role one chooses is determined by a lot of factors: one's age (children are supposed to behave differently than adults), one's gender, one's cultural background, the situation (at home or in a restaurant), social milieu, etcetera. At home I may belch whenever I feel an urge to do so, in a restaurant on the other hand, I suppress this urge because I know it to be inappropriate public conduct. The question now is whether this situationally determined *behaviour* determines our *identity* as well? Are we someone else every time we play a different social role? Or is it that behind, or 'through' all the roles we play every day, there is something lasting, a core that stays the same?

My thesis is that although self-images and the behaviour accompanying them differ per situation, identities do not. Identities consist of the underlying characteristics that are stable enough as to identify all those different instances of behaviour as performances of one and the same person. A person's identity is what causes her to define a situation in a specific manner and gear her behaviour to this interpretation. That is why two people can have diametrically opposed conceptions of the same (physical) situation: one of them enters a church and laughs because of the spiritual cabaret that is being staged, whereas the other devoutly professes her faith. These different reactions are due to diverging identities. Someone with an aggressive and somewhat edgy temper will interpret a tense and potentially harmful situation in a completely different way than a very kind and peaceful soul will. No two people act entirely the same in a given situation.

Identity is that which endures throughout all the roles we play. There are some characteristics we carry with us in all the roles we play, be it that their *significance* may differ from role to role. For example, I remain a fairly tall, blond Dutchman in each of the roles I play, notwithstanding the fact that within my volleyball team this *property* gets valued higher than during office hours. In my self-conception though, this trait of mine perseveres: one of my chronic, distinguishing marks is my long, slender, well-trained body. On a psychological level the same applies. I may express varying

emotions in different situations, but underneath a stable personality remains.[45] My shyness, for example, is a quality I take with me wherever I go. Someone being rather introvert will feel the discrepancy between her behaviour and what she really is when she tries to conceal it by pretending to be extrovert. To give one more example: if a person did not believe in God, she might still consider saying she did in the presence of her mother-in-law in order to reassure her, being fully aware though of thwarting her true opinion on behalf of family politics. She could of course change her mind on the subject over time, but she will hold only one opinion on the subject at any moment. Therefore, atheism can be designated as *part of her identity*.[46]

So, both on an ecological and on a self-depictive level a person has some characteristics, be they of psychological, physical or moralistic nature, that are *role-proof*, that partake in an underlying identity. This applies even if they have been internalized during one of the many roles a person plays. The fact that I became acquainted with philosophical worldviews during my studies – so in *that particular academic setting* – did not prevent me from adopting them as a distinctive feature of my identity throughout all the roles I played thereafter and still do. A person's identity has to be distilled from the ensemble of roles she plays; her identity is the sum of the chronic features that pervade all the activities she engages in. Shibutani says:

> "Self-images vary from situation to situation, but each man has also a stable sense of personal identity. What he is willing or unwilling to do depends upon the kind of human being he thinks he is. […] Self-images are specific and differ from one context to another; one visualizes himself as playing a game, talking to his friends, reciting in a classroom, or whatever else he may be doing. In spite of the variety of things that one does he experiences all of these deeds as being performer by the same person. Even though self-images are constantly changing and never twice exactly the same, one has no

[45] I do not want to leave the impression of holding the view that personalities stay the same over the whole course of a life. Personalities change as well, although they will hardly ever change over night.
[46] Again, this is not to say that identities stay entirely the same over the whole course of life, in fact they are rather mobile: preferences change, people alter their looks, they work on their personalities. Yet there have to be relatively stable traits, the ones that enable identification and make us tell persons apart.
In addition, I am aware of the fact that the view I put forward is a highly debated one. For a contrasting view on social identity, see Bibi van den Berg's insightful work 'The situated self' (Van de Berg 2009), in which she proposes a Goffmanesk approach to the impact of technology on identies. (Chapter 3 in particular).

> difficulty in recognizing himself. […] Each person then, has a relatively stable *self-conception*" (Shibutani 2006: 214-5).[47]

It has to be remarked, though, that there is no such thing as a *zero-identity*. A *backstage* region – put in Goffman's terms - where a person's true identity is revealed. We always play some role, even when we are alone. Every situation has its own codes of conduct. Fact is that the presence of others *does change* reality and no one can withdraw from the gaze of the other. What we do see, is that people prioritize certain aspects of their identity in different situations. Within the walls of a university I am above all a philosopher, but in the gym this trait is completely irrelevant and I am prone to highlight being a passionate amateur cyclist rather. Or the fact that I am Dutch has much more meaning abroad, due to my exceptional status there and the expectations it raises, than when I am at home where it is no distinguishing trait at all.

2.6.2 Cultural, social and group identity

> Personal identity constitutes one's only tie with the rest of society; each person has status in a community only in so far as he can identify himself as a specific human being who belongs in a particular place. […] If men were not able to identify themselves and one another with consistency, our entire social and economic system would be in jeopardy.
>
> *Shibutani*

Before moving towards the conclusion of this section, I would like to put some things straight. During my investigations into this subject, I noticed that a couple of very important concepts in discourses on identity are regularly confused. How does personal identity relate to cultural, social and group identity? First of all, *social* identity and *cultural* identity are two different things. Social identity refers to what I explained in the preceding two sections: the fact that all human identity is established during

[47] As one reads, self-images do not equal self-conceptions. Self-images are temporary and situation-bound, whereas a self-conception is the chronic understanding a person has of herself. Self-conceptions equate to what I defined as personal identity earlier.

interaction with others. Going into the social dimension of identity formation would mean disclosing the exact way how others contribute to individuals' self-conceptions.

Cultural identity on the other hand means two things: first, one can speak of humans as *C*ultural beings – with capital C. Second, all humans live and grow up in a certain *c*ulture. *C*ulturality refers to our (almost unique) capacity of handing information down in a non-biological way.[48] In that sense, all human identity is Cultural identity. We are not animals that live by genetic programs alone. Now, *because* we are Cultural beings – thus dependent on the conveyance of knowledge and skills by others – we are always members of a group and grow old standing in a certain cultural genealogy. We are trained within a specific culture. This kind of group membership is what I call *c*ultural identity. In the articulation and formation of cultural identities narrative identity construction plays an important role. Many cultures are founded upon stories, such as Vergil's *Aeneis* did for the ancient Romans, or the history of the Dutch' rebellion against their Spanish oppressors in the sixteenth century that creates a sense of national identity in the Netherlands. For collective stories the same holds as for individual histories: in this case too its writers will try to tell a story that is as consistent, heroic and dignifying as possible.

The next question, then, is when does a group become a *culture*? The group (or groups) an individual takes part in can be anything from a small circle of friends to a nation. I shall call *cultures* the large groups one cannot choose freely: national identity, or the ethnic community one belongs to for example. Smaller units that one *can* choose – although they are frequently being called cultures as well - shall be labeled as *groups*. Zygmunt Bauman calls them communities of *fate* and of *ideas*: "It is common to say that 'communities' (to which identities refer as to entities that define them) are of two kinds. There are communities of life and fate whose members 'live together in an indissoluble attachment', and communities that are 'welded together solely by ideas or various principles'" (Bauman 2006: 11-12). For example, it was not my own choice to be born in the Netherlands and to be educated with all the elements that go with it: language, habits, morality, etcetera. Of course I could choose to emigrate and take on another nationality, but that would mean no more than switching to another *culture*. The friends I hang out with or the political party I am a member of on the other hand,

[48] Some higher animals, such as primates, are known to teach their offspring a small range of basic skills as well. One can think of using stones to crush nuts.

are groups open to my own choice of participation. During the nine months' stay in my mother's womb I was never asked in which country I would have liked to be born, but I can withdraw from a certain circle of persons if they no longer appeal to me.[49]

Summarizing, this means that culturally we are determined in a dual manner. In the first place, all identity is (in)formed by a process of Cultural inheritance and education: the (in)formation of the individual by other people with skills that she needs to survive in a world of growing complexity. Secondly, this formative process is always situated within a certain culture, i.e. a group of people having specific ways of living, moral frameworks and other shared customs. The fact, for example, that when growing up we are expected to develop a firm and individual sense of identity, is something very specific to our modern, Western culture. Someone living in the same spot on the Earth a couple of centuries earlier – say the Dark Ages – probably had a lot less to choose. On top of that, individuals might choose to adhere to smaller groups of various natures and identify with them.[50]

Therefore, because all identity is cultural identity, it is of no use opposing personal identity to cultural identity.[51] Even the opposition of group identity and personal identity is a flawed one, since every personal self-conception is made out of building blocks derived from many larger, social entities. Even what we value to be our most intimate and personal emotions, emotions that seem to bubble up from the deepest corners our souls, are not innate but turn out to be culturally taught. The sincerity of mourning a deceased relative takes nothing of its constructed nature. Had we been

[49] I do not want to leave the impression as to conceive of cultures as static entities. Especially nowadays – in the face of globalization – the lines between cultures have become blurred. National identities, for example, are hybrid creations of multiple historic and ethnical influences. Cultures are part of (global) dynamic processes of sedimentation and alteration of customs and ideas. Anthropologically it would be better therefore to speak of people being born and raised in a *dynamic cultural constellation*, rather than a *specific culture.* Also, Bauman's notion of groups of fate and ideas should not be seen as a static one: one can think of times, for example, in which religion clearly was someone's fate, depending on the community one has been born into. Nowadays, on the other hand, religion for a lot of people is much more of a deliberate choice.

[50] The same obviously applies to my 'transcendental' analysis of human identity in chapter one. Although I may have presented it as some kind of eternal truth about the nature of human identity, I am fully aware of the relativity of my analysis, which would have been a different one if written in different times or with a different cultural rucksack.

[51] Chronologically, cultural identity predates personal identity, since all children are born into a specific culture and are raised by its standards before they develop a notion of who they are. Take the acquisition of language as an example, which is a prerequisite for having personal identity. It has to be said that, although all identity is by necessity cultural identity, one can personally oppose a *certain* culture; in the case of a resistance identity against some cultural malpractice, for example, it does make sense opposing cultural to personal identity.

raised in a culture which did not mourn its dead, but celebrate the new life that will rise from the ashes instead, our reaction would have been totally different.

The distinction between personal, cultural and group identity is not so much one of a strict division, but rather an analytical distinction of elements that mutually shape a person's identity. For example, it is exactly identification with a specific group that often is singled out as the one characteristic that is most important to a person's personal sense of identity. Just think of a football hooligan who even wears his underwear in club colours, or religious fundamentalists who are willing to give their lives for their faith. There is no such thing as anti-social identity. (Although people sometimes behave anti-socially!) The only thing that changes is the perspective, in the case of personal identity the perspective is the one of the individual; in the case of group identity we take the group as unit of reference. Groups play a constitutive role in the formation of any identity – either affirmative or negatively. An individual may identify with a group or several groups, yet she will still have her own distinguishing characteristics within this group and emphasise her individuality; but an individual may also oppose to certain groups and derive her identity from this resistance. A hot-tempered environmental activist will find a common ground for identification with other activists when chaining themselves to the gates of a nuclear power plant, but will fight reduction to *just being this activist* equally strong, because of all the other things she is more. Again, the dialectics of sameness and difference – both belonging and resisting to group identities – appears typical of human identity, just like we saw on numerous other occasions in chapter 1.

Chapter 3
The three paradoxes of (late) modern identity

3.1 The quest for identity

The second chapter dealt with the 'method' of identity construction: the theory of narrative identity describes the procedure by which self-conceptions are composed. It also emphasised the role of 'the other' in the construction of identities. In this chapter I will move on to what is probably the most important of all facets of identities: their content. What do these self-conceptions consist of? What happened in the past centuries to turn personal identity into a major sociological, psychological and philosophical issue? Why are the media these days littered by the talk of – national, cultural, or the 'loss' of – identity? The notion of personal identity did not enjoy scientific attention until 1690, when Locke introduced it in his *Essay concerning human understanding*. Although the talk of identity is almost as old as philosophy itself, specific interest in *personal* identity came into the picture only then. Apart from the documented biographical occasion of Locke being requested by a reviewer to write something on the *principium individuationis*, there has to be a deeper cause for the issue of personal identity to gain popularity in precisely those days, in that part of the world, not to be expunged from our agendas ever since. In the first chapter I performed a rather formal, phenomenological analysis of the concept of identity, therefore, it is time now to go into its contents. How have people thought of their identities in the past centuries? Can we discern some major developments? Why did identity become so problematic a phenomenon, as is proven by the vast array of books and articles on the subject that appeared in recent years?[52]

[52] In the introduction to a volume of studies published in 1996 Stuart Hall already observed: "There has been a veritable discursive explosion in recent years around the concept of 'identity'" (Quoted in

3.1.1 Navigating the moral universe

> To know who you are is to be oriented in a moral space, a space in which questions arise about what good is or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary.
>
> *Charles Taylor*

Let me first briefly elaborate on what I mean by the 'content' of identities. Basically, I understand by it the meaningful answer one gets when a person responds to the question 'who are you?'. The question 'who are you?' is of a totally different ontological order than the question 'what is the I?', such as it has been addressed in the first chapter. It is highly unlikely that a person starts talking of ecological selves and transcendental subjects when asked for her identity. In fact, when posed in an ordinary, non-philosophical setting, the question 'who are you?' concerns above all a matter of *recognition*. One is likely to get an answer in terms of name, whereabouts, occupation, age, etcetera. The self-reflexive question 'who am I?', on the other hand, contains an obvious existential dimension. It concerns matters of moral distinction and meaningful activities. Usually, if at least the talk is not explicitely about forensic identity in for example a legal context, a person's identity involves her moral stance in life. That is, morality is understood in its broadest sense: identities are about the beliefs we cherish, about our perspectives on life, about what is valuable to us and what is not.

According to Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, it is essential to any expression of human identity that it contains such a moral stance, some sort of orientation in moral space. In his opus magnum *Sources of the self* he writes: "... being a self is inseparable from existing in a space of moral issues, to do with identity and how one ought to be. It is being able to find one's standpoint in this space, being able to occupy, to *be* a perspective in it" (Taylor 1989: 112). In Taylor's opinion it is impossible to lead a human life without some sort of moral guideline, without an idea of what is right and wrong. We would wander around in a moral vacuum, without knowing where to go, what to do and why to do so, to paraphrase Nietzsche. This is the reason why Taylor felt it necessary to write his book on modern identity: he witnessed that these moral

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Bauman 2001: 140.) Bauman then goes on to say: "A few years have passes since that observation was made, during which the explosion has triggered an avalanche" (Ibidem).

frameworks were retreating or losing authority. In his view, the threat of amorality is imminent. I will come back to this further on in this chapter, when I address the problem of nihilism.

Taylor asserts: "My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand" (Ibid: 27). Having an identity means having a position in this space of moral questions; answering life's big questions, knowing what is the good thing to do and gearing one's actions and lifestyle to it.[53] If we lose this orientation towards the good, we lose our identity and in the end our ability to act. In this sense, what we popularly call an identity crisis is caused by the loss of our orientation towards the good: we no longer know how to behave and what to think. We fail to judge what is valuable to us, what is worth doing, what has meaning and what has not.[54]

Between the lines of his text one can read Taylor's 'moral anthropology' – which is very close to the one of Paul Ricoeur – which forms the philosophical foundation beneath his identity-theory. It contains a couple of important axioms about human nature. First of all, according to Taylor all human beings are *historical* beings: they are part of an ever changing history and more importantly, they are always temporally orientated. That is, they live their lives within a constantly shifting temporal horizon, both looking back and trying to make sense of the past and looking ahead by planning their future. Secondly, our notion of identity is always of *linguistic* nature. More precisely, it is built by means of narratives. Furthermore, being a true communitarian, Taylor emphasises the social nature of all human identity. Finally, Taylor stresses throughout his book that one of the outstanding marks of human identity lies in the *first-person perspective* its bearer always has. Identities are experienced from within,

[53] Obviously, these stances do not last a lifetime. People change their position on numerous occasions during the course of a life, especially during the formative, explorative years of young adulthood. They may even hold contradictory views at a given moment.

[54] One has to distinguish between an identity crisis and an identity conflict. An identity crisis means a lack of moral orientation, the loss of the moral compass. An identity conflict concerns a discrepancy between self-image and actual behaviour: performance and self-image collide. A person in conflict with herself feels like acting 'out of herself', not expressing her true identity. One can think of a situation where it turns out that the impression one leaves is by far not what one thought or hoped it to be. Or a situation that forces a person into behaviour that she deems morally reprehensible. By consequence, a severe identity crisis – such as a depression – does not necessarily imply a conflict of identity. One can be perfectly 'at one' with himself, and still be in search of a moral framework and a purpose to life.

via an inner world, which ensures every new experience to by placed against an already existing psychological and moral framework.

Taylor's most important insight, though, remains that human beings by essence are *moral* creatures. By means of their identities they express their moral orientation. One's moral stance also is the pre-eminent way to distinguish oneself from others, to have and develop a unique identity. It contains the characteristics that portray a person in her exclusive manner of conduct and perspectives on life. As a rule, one could say that identity is conceived of in this moral sense, unless it is deliberately put in a legal context, thus referring to forensic identity. In the remainder of this book I will take personal identity mainly in this moralistic fashion, since this is the sort of identity that is under discussion in the web applications this study focuses on.

3.2 Making sense of life

> Thinking means to undermine, to undermine oneself.
> Acting involves fewer risks, because acting bridges the gap between things and ourselves, whereas thinking dangerousy largens that distance.[55]
>
> *Emil Cioran*

Emil Cioran once called the human being the 'busy ape', admiring the ability of our animal forebears to indulge in idleness happily. Somewhere along the lines of our evolution this desirable capacity of coping with monotony and sensorial deprivation got lost. Observing the behaviour of apes and other animals prompts modern *Homo Sapiens* to ask: 'don't they get bored?' This question typically pops up in the head of a *human* being. In nature he is probably the only creature not capable of enduring monotony, the only one in constant need for action and novelty (Cf. Cioran 1984: 166). Ever since, humans have devised impressive means to combat the specter of boredom. A direct psychological line runs from our ancient forebears to today's spoiled screenagers, who fill their days with soap operas and video games. Philosophy and the sciences are just another branch on the ever-growing tree of self-entertainment

[55] Author's translation.

facilities. Meanwhile 50 percent of the GDP of industrialized countries is generated by the entertainment industries. If one looks at it commonsensibly, one cannot but observe that we owe a great deal of our cultural development and current economic prosperity to this fear of emptiness. Because of the anxious existential discomfort it causes, boredom provoked the goods of human culture we are so proud of.

Thus, this is the paradoxical plight we find ourselves caught up in: our cultural greatness is both endangered and spurred by the looming threat of emptiness within us. Unlike their animalistic counterparts, human beings have to go through the painful experience of birth on numerous occasions during their lives. The cerebral capacities that elevate them high above nature, simultaneously saddle them with the lifelong task of bridging the abyss between their consciousness and the world. This is precisely what the aformentioned Cioran called 'the trouble with being born'.[56] Subjectivity implies distance; self-consciousness is both pinnacle and abyss of human existence. It made Beethoven compose his ninth symphony, but it also raises disquieting questions that threaten to undermine our peace of mind: Who am I? Why am I here? What am I here for? As German philosopher Rüdiger Safranski comments on the human condition: "I am free from the force of nature and free to determine myself. But this means a painful separation: by birth one is put on this world, but now one has to give birth to oneself over and over again, deliberately and resolutely" (Safranski 2001: 10).[57]

Human beings are sense seekers. They are driven by the frustrating habit of looking for the sense of their actions. Merely performing actions is not enough: human beings want to know what it means they are doing, why so, and to what purpose. Looking for sense amounts to a double search: it means looking for meaning and looking for purpose. People try to understand their own lives and all that goes with it – *make* sense of it –, but they also try to figure out the purpose of their lives and actions – *give* sense to it. As was just pointed out by Rüdiger Safranksi, human beings have the ability to take a reflexive stance, human beings never fully coincide with themselves and their present actions. They can always draw a reflexive loop that separates them from their dealings, creating a space for disquieting questions. Identities are forged within this tension. Creating an identity is an attempt to satisfactorily answer the existential questions that so often trouble our minds.

[56] *The trouble with being born* is the title of the book by Cioran I quoted. See Cioran 1984.
[57] Author's translation.

3.2.1 How do we make sense of life?

So, what then makes life worth living? This can be anything one would probably argue: raising children, enjoying a good meal, helping the needy, going into politics. In our liberal society we are apt at dodging this question by leaving it entirely up to the individual how to make sense of her life. Yet, I believe there is more to say about this issue. It is certainly not impossible to distinguish some general strategies that people use to tackle the problem of meaning. Two grand strategies can be observed in this regard: for one people rely on a larger context in order to embed their own lives in it – looking for community and coherence –; the other strategy seems the exact opposite: to highlight one's exceptionality, one's outstanding – and therefore valuable – qualities. People imbue their lives with meaning in this dialectical movement: oscillating between seeking distinction and seeking community. In the upcoming pages I will explain why this is only seemingly an opposition and will lay bare the complementarity of both methods.

We can trace the desire for distinction all the way back to the dialogues of Plato, who already described the desire for recognition – the *thymos* or human pride – as a part of the soul. Plato's warrior ethics would nowadays probably go somewhat like: 'My life wasn't useless, because look at what I have achieved in business! I took my life in my hands and lifted it to a higher level.' The message remains the same: we draw meaning from special deeds, from an outstanding personality or some other feat we deem exclusive. An individual's life becomes intrinsically worthy, a kind of irreplaceable work of art. I am worthy of living because I am the only one like me! This way of looking for meaning fits perfectly with the dominant culture of personal growth, life-long learning and self-centeredness. In our modern culture of self-invention, one of the greatest fears is uniformity. 'You are so ordinary' is without any doubt one of the worst insults to swallow. Not only our biological *will to power*, but more so our sociogenetic struggle for recognition propels our behaviour towards excellence. The irony is that precisely in regard to this culture of artistic-creative self-distinction we are all very much the same.

Whereas in the past Christian people believed to be exceptional because of their unique relation with God – touched by a divine spark –, they now have to gain self-

esteem by drawing on their own, inner depth[58]. If we ask ourselves 'who am I?', we look for an answer that is socially viable but still sets us apart from all the others. There are numerous characteristics a person can revert to when thus expressing her personal identity and outlining what separates her from the rest. One can point at physical marks (how beautiful or how fit am I?), personality (patient or passionate), moral virtues, social status (richness, good neighbourhood), beliefs, preferences (expensive food, five-star holiday, classical music), or achievements (career, school, love). In short, it is about what one considers respectable opinions, feats and virtues. Together, these traits form the modern *principium individuationis* between individuals. Charles Taylor would subsume this palette of characteristics under the umbrella of *moral stance*. We strive for recognition on the grounds of what we have achieved, what we worked for, and not so much what nature bestowed upon us at birth.

Although the individual is the center this way of giving meaning to life revolves around, it still is a project that is social through and through. Because of the need for recognition, the ideal of self-realization always points at the other. There has to be at least one other human being to acknowledge my identity! In more than this one way this existential strategy is less individualistic than it might initially seem. In the next subsection I explain why.

3.2.2 The value of communities

> "But our normal understanding of self-realization presupposes that some things are important beyond the self, that there are some goods or purposes the furthering of which has significance for us and which hence can provide the significance a fulfilling life needs. A total and fully consistent subjectivism would tend towards emptiness: nothing would count as a fulfilment in a world in which literally nothing was important but self-fulfilment" (Taylor 1989: 507).

Is it possible for a single shipwrecked person to lead a fulfilling life on a deserted island in the Pacific Ocean? Charles Taylor would obviously argue no. And for good

[58] In the Romantic era this inner depth or 'inner voice' was heard in nature or in the form of (non-rational) feelings (Cf. Taylor 1989: 355-67; Gergen 1991: 20-27). Today, this rhetoric of self-finding is accompanied by a rhetoric of self-invention.

reasons. As I mentioned in the former section, even a self-indulged, egocentered person needs other people to tickle her vanity. Somehow, meaning and importance of our actions have to come from a bigger unit. Making sense of an action means putting it in a context, putting it in a larger coherence, a meaningful framework in which the actions play their role. Creating meaning, above all, means the creation of temporal and social cohesion. Then human conduct becomes purposive conduct, contributing to the working of a supra-individual structure. I will briefly go into what I regard the three main types of such structures.

The classical way of putting oneself in a bigger whole is by reverting to some kind of metaphysical order. There is a vast and diverse spectrum of grand narratives that have been devised during the past millennia in order to resuscitate people, ranging form animistic religions to Plato's world of Ideas, the Christian God and Marx's account of historical necessity.[59] It involves the belief in the existence of some form of original entity, which in itself stands outside the realm of questioning from where meaning radiates back to the individual. Sense, then, is drawn from this necessary order of things, which may come in the guise of honouring a divine creator, being promised heavenly salvation or preparing the red revolution.

The second type of creating coherence is a little bit more down to earth. People still look for structures that transcend individual life, but on this occasion they set inner world goals: "If meaning and worth come with relations of certain sorts, perhaps in the first instance to other selves, but possibly also to nature, to work, to oneself, then perhaps we are wisest to look for grounds of meaning and worth in this life – in relations we can have during this life" (Flanagan 1996: 8). This is likely to be the most common and familiar way of embedding one's life in a larger structure. Various forms of social organisation can be thought of here: families, companies, nations, tennis clubs or political parties. It is the group membership that gives us not just a sense of identity, but also a sense of purpose to life. Parents feel they are responsible for their children, and an employee feels that she is responsible for part of the operating process of the firm she works for. Here we come across the interplay of striving after excellence and devoting oneself to a collective cause. What gives the individual a purpose is that she gets the idea of being a small but indispensable cog in the social machine. Because of

[59] For an explanation of the concept of *grand narratives* and their delegitimization see Lyotard 2001: 108-114.

her own, special talents she is vital to this particular organisation. She tells herself and is told by others that she plays a crucial role in the organisation's functioning and she is recognised for it by the other members.

The third type of coherence guides us into the realm of abstract goals. Instead of finding coherence in short-ranged family matters or entrepreneurial interests, this type of coherence widens the horizon to include transhistorical purposes like the well-being of mankind or scientific progress. Artists, scientists, philosophers; do they not consider their works important because of their alleged contribution to the power and glory of mankind? But one need not go that far: the same gratifying experience holds for the banal act of procreation, thereby fulfilling our genetic 'duty' and preserving the miracle of life. Has any human being ever asked for the purpose of an orgasm? It gives the feeling of doing a (the!) deed that is intrinsically valuable. There are lots of 'good deeds' – tenets that Taylor would call the *moral good* –, causes that people find worthy dedicating there lives to: volunteering for medical aid in Africa to reduce suffering, sailing a Greenpeace vessel in an attempt to save the environment, marching the streets in favour of social justice, or doing scientific research in the hope of claiming a spot in the history of ideas. Again, here too the complementarity of private vice and public virtue is evident. The egoistic battle for recognition and fame coincides with collective purposes. The vanity of many talented persons and their determination to accomplish something that can withstand the ravages of time makes our civilization prosper.

Human beings thrive by projecting a (better) future. The thought of other, future conscious selves, the thought of their children is enough to give human beings a goal to live for. No matter how sophisticated and self-centered we have become; even in modern human beings the interests of the species still prevail. Immagine that because of genetic mutations caused by solar radiation human fertility would decline rapidly and the human race would be sure to disappear within three generations from now. What would happen if this doomsday message became true? Would we make it to the end of this three-generation period? Who would still go to her office or to school knowing that all is ending soon anyway? Does everyone go on with what they were doing anyway, making the best of it, or would the world be swept by a global wave of chaos, anarchy and despair? Ironically, this predicament applies to each single individual even without this global, genetic catastrophe happening. Everyone's death means the end of things. As Wittgenstein wrote: the world is always mine

(Wittgenstein 1999: 67). On a phenomenological level there has never been, and will never be anything else than 'my world', the world as I perceived and experienced it.

In philosophical anthropology human beings' orientation towards the future is seen as one of the outstanding marks that distinguishes them from the animal kingdom. According to German phenomenologist Martin Heidegger, for example, the essence of human beings is their existence: instead of being characterized by some fixed 'core', some essential substance or quality, what is peculiar to human beings is their historicity: human beings know their past, envision their future and project their lives onto this temporal map (Cf. Heidegger 1993: 325-331). Human beings are not capable of merely 'being in the moment' like an animal does – remember the quotation about the 'busy ape' I used to open this section. Although by intuition animals plan ahead also, by building stock for the winter for example, they can hardly be attributed an existential, self-conscious concern for themselves. In chapter 1 I already explained that a sophisticated language system is a minimal condition in order for self-consciousness to rise. For human beings it proves almost impossible to stay alive without some future goal to aim for.

Purpose is something that comes to us from the future. Doing a job provides us with a satisfying experience as long as the job has not been finished yet. Once it has been done, it loses its capacity of providing meaning and we look for a new challenge. We always tend to look ahead: what am I doing tomorrow? What will be my next assignment? What would be a suitable job after completing this one? The remembrance of past achievements may give us a smile on the face, a moment of pride or shame, but they cannot help us in making it to the next day. What gave my life a direction yesterday, for example the book I wanted to read; today has lost its purpose because I did so. Writers think up their next book before finishing the one under construction, politicians are barely elected when they start their next campaign, travellers who only just disembarked the airplane rush to a PC to book their next trip. Idleness is difficult to bear. After I complete this dissertation it will probably rest untouched upon my bookshelf while I write my next book. I live here and now, but my head always is 'ahead' of me: my agenda for tomorrow, the concert I am going to attend later this week, the dinner with my partner tomorrow and all the pleasant things that happen from there on. These kinds of desires and plans are utterly necessary to lead a

meaningful life: a life without some sort of future hopes and aspirations would swiftly degenerate into unbearable apathy.

Identities are self-descriptions used by persons to give their lives a direction, to express the frameworks their lives are part of. Meaning is derived from them: backward, as a point of reference, and forward, as a horizon of possibilities, aims and wishes. Charles Taylor too admits that the expression of personal identity is not so much of a goal, as it is a *method* of creating life-supporting contexts (Cf. Taylor 1989: 376-77). On a larger scale this is exactly what cultures do: apart from their function of conveying knowledge and skills, culture also means creating a livable domain in an inhospitable, natural world deprived of meaning. Human beings feel at ease and safe when absorbed in a community based on the principle of mutual love, care and respect. Friendships, for example, are ways of 'anchoring' onself, of using the construction of a social identity to get a hold in life. An identity gives a person her existential coordinates, so to speak. It helps to navigate through moral space, through the stormy sea that hopefully leads us to the heavenly shores of a good life.

3.3 Living in late modernity

"Life is work in progress, with no goal in sight, only the tireless endeavour to explore new possibilities, to respond to the chance event – the singular point – that takes us off in a new direction."

Francis Bacon

3.3.1 Modern subjectivity: inventing oneself

Apart form projecting a future life, answering the question 'who am I?' also points toward the desire to be in harmony with oneself. We want to bridge the gap between who we are and who we want to be, for example, to match our self-conception with our physical appearance. Equally, one could claim that we are driven by the desire to see our lives within a larger social structure and understand ourselves as (a vital) part of it. Or to put it differently: to bridge the gap between our own consciousness and that of

others. In either case we attempt to create a comforting isle of selfness in the vast, hostile see of otherness that surrounds us. Anthony Giddens adresses this topic in his book *Modernity and self-identity* by contending that human beings seek a 'protective cocoon': we cannot live without some minimal basis of trust (Cf. Giddens 1991: 40). What this trust is ranges from tomorrow's rising of the sun (although I cannot be one-hundred percent sure of that!) to the support one gets from family members. According to Giddens we need a minimum amount of 'ontological security' for not to drown in the chaos of existence, even if this means deceiving oneself such as in the case of the sun rising. The same goes for the presupposition of identities – for example, if I make an appointment with somebody I expect to meet the same person next week – which physically is untrue, since all matter is in constant motion: one cannot set foot in the same river twice. Yet we cannot do away with such basic experiences of trust. Giddens especially refers to emotional trust such as the reliance of a child upon its parents and the feeling of 'things being alright' they provide their child with. "The protective cocoon is the mantle of trust that makes possible the sustaining of a viable *Umwelt*" (Ibid: 129).

Identities are forged to meet this need. Personal identity functions as the spider, whose arms knit the varying aspects of life together to create a life-sustaining web. Answering the reflexive question 'who am I' always takes place against this background of potential insecurity, of worriness, of daunting possibilities, maybe even fear. What basically gets acknowledged is: "Shit, I'm here, I'm living and have to make the best of it!" This beam of insight that hits the individual during so-called *fateful moment*s (Cf. Giddens 1991: 112) causes an existential, primeval pain that is typical of human beings and transforms their natural surplus – that is, their capacity of self-conscious thinking – into a nagging lack: they are saddled with the herculian task to give birth to themselves. Human beings are existential nomads forced to permanently rebuild their homes.

That is where we touch upon the problem of freedom. The never-healing wound of subjectivity compels us to define ourselves over and over again. We came across this insight earlier when I explained Ricoeur's notion of *ipseity* and Kant's notion of *noumenal* subjectivity. In his book *Eurotaoismus*, German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk reads human existence against the backdrop of the drama of birth, that is, the moment we all get 'thrown' out of the safe, maternal womb and into the hostile, outer world. Subjectivity is the ongoing process of erecting oneself which starts from there on and

which lasts a whole life. Resembling Gidden's analyses Sloterdijk brings up the necessity of creating a 'sphere' (cf. Gidden's cocoon) of security. He calls human beings 'deficiently born' animals, creatures that do not coincide with the world and therefore find themselves confronted with the task of building a world to feel at home in. Sloterdijk writes: " .. constantly the subject tries to find hold in a certain attitude by making this effort of bearing itself" (Sloterdijk 1991: 151)[60]. "Subjectivity is the kinetic effort-who-I-am" (Ibid: 160).

Just as we saw in the previous section, every human being needs some sort of 'project', a goal to live for: a career, the promise of loyalty to a partner, nourishing a child or personal growth. According to Sloterdijk this existential anxiety is so powerful that it has become one of the 'authors of history' ('geschichtemachend'), which explains why in the introductory remarks of this section boredom was called the motor of history. We keep pushing the primeval pain of subjectivity – the question of life's purpose – away by staying busy and constantly inventing new projects to pursue. In this sense identity has become a project in modern times: it reflects the never ceasing challenge of inventing oneself. As Bauman puts it: "No more was it (human nature, jt) seen, no more could it be seen, as 'given'. Instead, it turned into a *task*, and a task which every man and woman had no choice but to face up to and perform to the best of their ability. 'Predestination' was replaced with 'life project', fate with vocation – and a 'human nature' into which one was born was replaced with 'identity' which one needs to saw up and make fit" (Bauman 2001: 142).

3.3.2 Late modern scepticism: institutionalizing doubt

I put forward the question why personal identity has become a troublesome issue in modernity. One of the reasons why this is the case can be found in the way we have become used to look at knowledge and (scientific) truth. Since the scientific revolution all knowledge is under constant scrutiny. The new scientific paradigm that took hold relegated all knowledge to *hypothetical* knowledge and all answers to *temporary* answers. The same applies to traditional institutions of truth-telling: we no longer take the docter, priest or professor for their word. Doubt, in the guise of the introduction of

[60] Author's translation.

hypotheses in the sciences, entered the heart of scientific method: “But the reflexivity of modernity actually undermines the certainty of knowledge, even in the core domains of natural science. Science depends, not on the inductive accumulation of proofs, but on the methodological principle of doubt” (Giddens 1991: 21). Giddens contends that in modernity doubt became the dominating method of knowledge-seeking.

One of the founding fathers of this new scientific paradigm was Descartes. In Descartes’ case, though, doubt played a strictly methodical role – it did not lead to existential doubt. Descartes applied his scepticism against the background of a divine order, a divine creator, aiming to establish His existence with even more certainty. But he never doubted to find proof of this divine order (Cf. Perone 1998: 8-9). As he writes himself: "... my whole plan had for its aim assurance and the rejection of shifting ground and sand in order to find rock or clay" (Descartes 1968: 50). Still, by giving scepsis such a crucial place in the process of finding truth, Descartes stood at the beginning of the history of the institutionalization of doubt. Giddens observes: “Doubt, a pervasive feature of modern critical reason, permeates into everyday life as well as philosophical consciousness, and forms a general existential dimension of the contemporary social world. Modernity institutionalises the principle of radical doubt and insists that all knowledge takes the form of hypotheses: claims which may very well be true, but which are in principle always open to revision and may have at some point to be abandoned” (Giddens 1991: 3).

A good example of the *debunking* of human supremacy and greatness was provided by Freud when he outlined the three big ‘humiliations’ human beings had to deal with in the past centuries.[61] The first one was Copernicus’ discovery that the earth was not the center of the universe as was believed before. To make things worse, his theories were then confirmed by Keppler, Galilei en Newton. It pushed human beings away from the middle of creation onto a trivial planet orbiting its star, floating somewehere in the infinite vastness of space. The second assault on human dignity came from Darwin when his theory of natural selection threw the human being off her divine, pre-destined throne and turned her into the human *animal*, descended from the apes. Psycho-analysis, finally, showed that we are not the ‘masters in our own homes’. It undermined human autonomy by laying bare the subconscious processes that steer our moods and conduct beyond our conscious control. We could summarize these

[61] In: *Een moeilijkheid in de psychoanalyse, 140-42.*

happenings by saying that they all point towards a *relativizing* of human powers and her role as the *Chosen*. We have reached a point in history where we can call into question even ourselves.

This modern version of scepticism has far-reaching consequences for any individual now living. "Being 'at ease' in the world is certainly problematic in the era of high modernity", Giddens aptly puts it (Giddens 1991: 126). If we went yet one step further, and "if we tried to rely entirely on reason, and pressed it hard, our lives and believes would collapse..." (Nagel 1979: 20). The danger we then face is slipping into a stage of hyperrationality: we are running the risk of becoming so rational that rationality starts to undermine itself. Nihilism lurks around the corner. This likely predicament is what the next subsection is about.

3.3.3 Nihilism

The name that comes up almost automatically when hearing the word nihilism is Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche diagnosed European history as the history of nihilism. To Nietzsche the word nihilism meant both the *worthlessness* of life itself and the *worthlessness of human attempts* to give worth to life. In its earliest stages nihilism came in the form of a belief in a transcendent reality – an illusion – such as Plato's ideas or the Christian God. Little by little this way of giving meaning to our existence began to erode. Due to the process of hyperrationality I mentioned earlier, Nietzsche saw nihilism transforming into its next stage: people started to doubt their own fictions. Rationality reached its own limits. Our *will to truth* became cannibalistic and began to cut its own grounds. Analyzed rationally our supposed highest truths turned out to be *nothing* (nihil). Nietzsche's era, the nineteenth century, which was an age of positivism, spiritual jolt and capitalistic mobilization, left only little room to high-flown ideals (Cf Timmermans 2003: 11-15).

Charles Taylor sees the same development and relates it to the problem of identity: "The big thing that happened since is the opening of other possible sources. […] Secularisation doesn't just arise because people get a lot more educated, and science progresses. This has some effect, but isn't decisive. What matters is that masses of people can sense moral sources of a quite different kind, ones that don't necessary

suppose a God" (Taylor 1989: 313). Of what kind are these supposed changes and what are non-Christian ways of giving meaning?

Let us look at family life for example. What is striking about how we treat children these days in comparison to a couple of centuries ago, is that now children have become a sort of life-project. For a lot of people building a happy family or failing to do so has become the decider in terms of happiness and fulfillment. In the seventeenth century on the other hand, children where often seen a necessary element of life and parents could not wait to see them grow up and enter the labor process. That is not to say pre-modern persons knew no love, affection or care for their children: "What changes is not that people begin loving their children or feeling affection for their spouses, but that these dispositions come to be seen as a crucial part of what makes life worthy and significant. Whereas previously these dispositions were taken as banal…" (Taylor 1989: 292).[62]

To put this one example in perspective: what happened on a more structural, socio-economic level is that due to the transition from the medieval, feudal class society, in which almost every human being was destined by birth to a certain social status and occupation, to the modern, industrialized state, social mobility increased dramatically and to some degree people became free to choose their own lives. Gradually, a society was born with ever more equality and economic perspective. It was no longer evident that if your father was a shoesalesman you had to become one as well. But this freedom held a burden. The other side of this coin is that identity is no longer as obvious as it had hitherto been, when on the socio-economic plane people lived predictable, often even predestined lives. "The idea that each person has a unique character and special potentialities that may or may not be fulfilled is alien to pre-modern culture. In medieval Europe, lineage, gender, social status and other attributes relevant to identity were all relatively fixed. […] the 'individual', in a certain sense, did not exist in traditional cultures, and individuality was not prized. […] We are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves" (Giddens 1991: 74-75).[63]

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[62] See also: Elisabeth Badinter, *De mythe van de moederliefde*, 1983. Badinter discovered that the concept of instinctive love for the child is not as universal as we currently think in the West, but a sentiment that waxes and wanes throughout history.

[63] I have to make a short comment on this interpretation. The historical development I sketch may exist, but for individuals now living it is impossible to experience these gradual transformations: experientially there is no other world to us than the current one. The 'community life' in a medieval village, for example, is completely alien to us and therefore something we cannot possibly miss.

A lot of commentators see this very same transition taking place, Kenneth Gergen for example writes: "… John Lyons proposes that the centrality of the self was largely a product of late-eighteenth-century thought. Before then, people tended to view themselves as exemplars of more general categories – members of a religion, class, profession, or the like" (Gergen 1991: 11). In Zygmunt Bauman's *Identity* one comes across the same shift: "Social affiliations – more or less inherited – that are traditionally ascribed to individuals as a definition of identity: race … gender, country or place of birth, family and social class, are now … becoming less important, diluted and altered, in the most technologically and economicly advanced countries. At the same time, there is a longing for, and attempts to find or establish new groups to which one experiences belonging and which can facilitate identity-making. An increasing feeling of insecurity follows …" (Lars Dencik, in: Bauman 2006: 24).

Giddens in particular takes this last point up and zooms in on the downsides of this hard-won personal freedom. He sees existential insecurity and social discomforts rising. We may live in ever-expanding societies, but are we still members of real communities? He gives the impression that we have become social atoms, knit together only by macro-structures like national borders and megacities, but bereft of intimate bonding. "Modernity, it might be said, breaks down the protective framework of the small community and of tradition, replacing these with much larger, impersonal organisations. The individual feels bereft and alone in a world in which she or he lacks the psychological supports and the sense of security provided by more traditional settings" (Giddens 1991: 34). A bit further down the page, though, he acknowledges that this supposed loss entails new possibilities as well and that it creates a tension between chances and threats: " … yet this is not a situation of loss, and it does not imply either that anxiety levels necessarily increase." Others call this the *risk-society* (Cf. Beck 2007), a world in which security gave way to probability, and a world in which dangers and uncertainty pervaded. Jenkins enumerates some of the most important changes that shaped our modern world: reorientations of work and family, class and status mobility, migration, medical and technological innovation, the redrawing of political borders (Cf. Jenkins 2004: 11).

These cultural developments have implications in the field of identity construction. As it appears, life, and as a consequence identities, have become a problem under

conditions of late modernity. “What to do? How to act? Who to be? These are focal questions for everyone living in circumstances of late modernity – and ones which, on some level or another, all of us answer, either discursively or through day-to-day social behaviour” (Giddens 1991: 70). Kenneth Gergen too, sees the communal sources for an identifiable self diminishing, rendering it increasingly difficult to answer the question of ‘who am I?’ He feels we move into “a cultural condition in which our identities are increasingly more situated, conditional, and optional” (Gergen, *Cell phone technology and the challenge of absent presence*). Bauman adds an economic argument to the issue and links identity to changes in the realm of labor: “The question of identity is associated too with the breakdown of the welfare state and the subsequent growth in a sense of insecurity, with the ‘corrosion of’ character that insecurity and flexibility in the workplace have produced in society” (Baumann 2006: 5).

So, why is finding meaning so difficult these days? Why did identity become such a big issue? Summing up, we can point out at least three major changes that occurred in the past centuries, which are aspects of our predicament of what one might call ‘identity-nihilism’. First, there is nihilism in the Nietzschean sense: the partial breakdown of traditional frameworks of identification, the demise of the ‘grand narratives’ as Lyotard termed them. Second, we now live in an age of ‘institutionalized doubt’ as we learnt from Giddens, an era in which definitive answers are taboo and all stances and persons are open to critisicm. Nobody or anything is beyond questioning and we deem identities mobile. The third change is the emergence of a pluralism of lifeworlds: the number of contexts people lead their lives in has increased dramatically. People spend their time scaterred over a number of geographical, social, recreational, economic and political spaces. Each sector consumes our attention, in each of them we play a different role and we are asked to express ourselves accordingly. Kenneth Gergen called this facette of modern life ‘multiphrenia’. This ‘cacophony of voices’ within our heads makes it difficult to maintain unity of character (Cf. Gergen 1991: 73).

3.4 Media – identity – globalization

The change last mentioned leads us to another historical development that very much influenced the process of finding meaning: media-related globalization. Instead of leading entire lives in one village (affluent) people have become (virtual) globetrotters, both physically and culturally. The rise of the network society meant that the range of lifestyles, opinions, religions and products at our disposal nowadays is overwhelming. We come across a vast number of foreign cultures, which all suggest different beliefs, different habits, different ways of looking at things. After all, one has the option of becoming a Buddhist only after meeting one or reading about it. Presently, we live in a world of sheer endless possibilities, refusing to prioritize one lifestyle over the other.

We cannot understand the modern identity properly without taking the impact of media on identities into account. What did the introduction and proliferation of media do to our identities in the past and how is this nowadays? How did they contribute to the development of our self-understanding? Aware as I am of the vast scope of these issues, I shall not try to cover the whole history of media, but limit myself to a couple of examples – that are representative of the main theme of this thesis – about how media played their part in (in)forming human identity, more in particular some of the social, mental or cultural changes media were involved in, and their role in the development of a new way of looking at the world.

3.4.1 Homo technologicus: media – movers – messengers

New media are often met by resistance and hesitation. Human beings may be novelty seekers, they are also creatures of habit. Call it evolutionary caution if you wish. Every new medium needs considerable time for its (old) users to get used to, and to weave it into their own practices. The story of the nascent railway system in the first half of the nineteenth century is a particularly famous and important one in this respect. It is often recalled how the first train passengers were dazzled by the speed of the vehicle and the rushing by of the landscape. A lot of passengers even are said to have become sick, which is quite difficult to imagine for us now if we keep in mind that those first trains traveled at a mere 20 to 30 miles per hour! (Cf. Müller 2009: 196-99)

Its success, though, was not long in coming. As a result of its astounding qualities in terms of transport, speed, comfort and connectivity the railway came to be seen as a symbol of progress, promising economic and social betterment, democracy, energy, freedom from old restrictions, all the benefits and opportunities of the constantly circulating liberty of modern, mechanized civilization (Harrington, quoted in Cresswell 2006: 20). Not only did the train herald the industrial revolution – the steam engine marked the substitution of natural by mechanical power – but all the more it helped forging a culture of speed and mobility accelerating till the present day. In the United States the train became the symbol of an era. The train embodied a nineteenth century society 'on the move', as it steamed ahead under its proud (but dark) clouds of progress in order to spread the message of freedom, trade and democracy. Mobility became a national characteristic. "To be an American is to go somewhere, especially to go West" (Urry 2007: 103). In his book *Mobilities,* John Urry points at the mechanization of movement through the railways which initiated the valuation of speed and especially the value that faster trains are better than slower ones (Ibidem: 99). High speed came to equal high status.

One of the consequences of the railway system Urry points at, is that it lead to a fundamental rethinking of space: distances were significantly shrunk. People could now travel farther in shorter time. Cities started to expand into new suburbs and work and home became separate spaces. Already in 1839 an English commentator suggested that the railways had the effect of 'compressing' time and space (Ibidem: 96). People were suddenly a whole lot nearer to each other. The identities of people able to afford frequent train travel came to be constituted through their increased connections with other places and other people. In this sense, the train was the first high-speed ICT: news and information of other parts of the country spread around more quickly and physical nearness became a lot easier as compared to travel by horse and foot. But not only did the train bring places at closer range and did it improve their accessibility, it also caused the transformation of places, of the countryside, into commodities (Ibidem: 101). After Thomas Cook had discovered railway tourism in the nineteenth century, by the twentieth century the world had become one large department store according to Urry, a store of countrysides and cities, places to consume and laid out for the delectation of potential visitors (Ibidem: 102). From a place to *live in*, the world had become a composite of places to visit, exploit, enjoy or simply pass by.

The proliferation of the railway system across the continents obviously had a lot more consequences than just the couple of them described above; yet they may serve as a fitting example of how media can have a bearing on peoples' lives and henceforth their identities. Media – or to put it in a somewhat broader perspective: technologies – have always caused a tremendous impact on societies and lifestyles. More than that, they also served as metaphors for understanding human nature. In early Enlightenment, for example, self-conceptions were phrased in terms of newly discovered mechanics, take the famous *l'homme machine* of De la Mettrie. In the Romantic era the novel spurred a highly individualistic and emotional concept of human nature (Cf. Gergen 1991: 22). In the late twentieth century we were able to witness a tendency to portray the human being in computer-like metaphors, as a piece of hardware equipped with software or as a network-like, information processing system. And who knows, under the influence of advancements in the field of biotechnology our present century might become known as the century of biology in which human beings slowly progress toward cyborgs. In this light, I want to dedicate some words to the nature and scope of technology in general and its importance for the human animal.

3.4.1.1 Media and Technology

To speak of a 'homo technologicus' really is a pleonasm. To be human *is* to use technology. Since the first stone was carved out and used as a tool technology helped shaping our lives, the way we interact, the way we think, and the way we conduct our businesses. Stones meant more power, better food and effective weaponry. In twentieth century philosophical anthropology in Germany a tradition of thinkers put emphasis on the technical roots of what it is to be human, with Helmut Plessner and Arnold Gehlen being the most well-known of them. In this line of reasoning philosopher Peter Sloterdijk pushes the argument even further. In his insightful essay *Domestikation des Seins* (domestication of being) he sees in the throwing of the first stone the birth of modern human beings. Using stones enabled prehistoric people to free themselves from their determination by natural forces and to discover the world as a field open to deliberate human modification and exploitation. Our world-consciousness as we know it today – being self-aware creatures that 'have' a world at their disposition – originated

when proto-human first started using tools. Using proto-techniques on surrounding nature meant the world to light up as a horizon of possible human intervention and made us aware of the difference between ourselves as manipulating subjects and the world. Therefore, Sloterdijk concludes, our particular way of being, that which makes us stand out from the rest of nature, is of technical origin (Cf. Sloterdijk 2001: 142-234).

If one continues this line of reasoning, then we have to admit that human beings have always been mediated and have always depended on media for their existence. This is not merely a trait of our industrial age. Our success as a species, which led us to occupy such an exceptional evolutionary spot on the face of this planet, has never been a matter of superior human anatomy or physical strength, but is inevitably entangled with our capacity to use technical means. Thanks to pre-conceived tools we managed to subdue nature and create the comfortable isle of spiritual life amidst the cosmic ocean of thoughtlessness we are part of. *Homo sapiens* was in the first place always *Homo Faber*.[64] Technology threw us into existence – made us into the self-conscious and ecstatic creatures we are today. In other words, our generic identity, that which singles us out as species, is technological through and through.

Therefore, human beings have been cyborgs right from the start (Cf. De Mul 2002: 228). Having culture means – as I explained earlier – passing on information down the tracks of history in a non-biological manner. Raising children and educating them comes down to cultivating the mental techniques that are necessary for any human being to stay alive in a complex, technology-driven society populated by large groups of people. Because of the astonishing, exponential growth of information available to us and the manifold skills we need to master, human beings have become more dependent on media by the year. Would you still dare stepping in a car if it were not for glasses, contact lenses and laser technology? Without technology our society would be doomed. Even worse so, it would never have existed in the way we know it today. Culture is the technical surplus that elevates humankind over nature. Within this

[64] Meanwhile the genus *Homo* is attributed with no less than three adjectives 'sapiens'. *Homo sapiens* is the word for the first human beings who used language and thought symbolically. *Homo sapiens sapiens* is meant to indicate the externalisation of our capacity to think by means of writing or computers nowadays, thereby expanding it greatly. *Homo sapiens sapiens sapiens* finally designates the human being in times of advanced information- and biotechnology, a being that is able to toy with its own biological make-up and transform its nature, in the end maybe even rendering itself redundant!

predicament technology is what makes it possible for us to live far above our mere biological standards.

3.4.1.2 Media

The media I investigate in this chapter could be classified as a means to transport either information or matter through time and space.[65] That is why we can rate both a book – as a time-bridging carrier of information – and a car – as a means for physical displacement – among media. Take reading a book as an example. Information is stored in the book in a code – language – and whoever knows that language is able to retrieve this information from the book. In the very moment of reading, thoughts are being created in the mind of the reader, meaning that some movement – however tiny – takes place in the reader's head. The reader is infused with a certain form, both on a molecular and electrical level, and on the level of having meaningful thoughts that were not in her head before reading the book. Passing on information comes down to the infusion of form, and media convey this form.

Or take the example of listening to a piano recital on a compact disc at home. From its composition to finding entry in your head the music went through numerous transformations, every one of them involved in transferring form from one carrier to another. The form (in this case a particular arrangement of air-trembling frequencies) travelled from the composer to the pianist via the score. The pianist transferred it to the instrument. The instrument set in motion air, which was caught by microphones. The vibrations were digitally encrypted onto a compact disc. A CD player decrypts the information and via an amplifier and a set of speakers changes it back into vibrating air molecules. Those vibrations finally cause the listener to hear music, thanks to another, advanced hearing-system that decodes the vibrations (Cf. Von Baeyer 2003: 25-6). In the age of digital media this process of conveying information can in principle be

[65] It needs no arguing that many other usages of the word media exist. In physics any substance that serves as a container to others, such as air or another gas, is called medium; or persons who claim to possess paranormal powers are called medium. A general trait which we could deduce from all the usages of the word media that exist, is that media in one form or another are always things *in-between* other things: they connect or fulfill a bridging role.

duplicated endlessly, and 'transposed' (to keep the musical metaphor running) between information carriers of various nature.

In their twofold quality of means of transportation and information media are the pulsating heart of every modern society: as a collective we are dependent on the movement of people and goods and the passing on of information. Put somewhat more bluntly: without trucks our supermarkets remain empty and without proper education no one learns a profession decently. Next to being a necessity in terms of physical survival, media have grown ever more important in a cultural sense as well. Like we saw above, culture does not only mean the transfer of knowledge and skills, but also the creation of a livable and meaningful domain in a harsh, inhospitable world, naturally devoid of any meaning. Human beings look for security, shelter and meaning in an intersubjective nexus, founded on the principle of mutual care and acknowledgement. Since the campfires have been replaced by television sets and the movies have replaced the telling of stories, media have become the social cement that binds people together.

In the age of digital media in particular a great deal of the social interactions we engage in are buttressed by media: websites bridge the generations and hand down knowledge; telephone technology and electronic data traffic made the world shrink into a single present by enabling people to communicate globally at almost light speed, and planes can take us to almost any place on earth within a matter of days. In terms of identity this meant that both our social horizon and our cultural frame of reference have expanded greatly: thanks to radio, television, the world wide web, postal services, telephone, transportation media and satellites, people with access to those media have become populated by the others, lifestyles, ideas and customs they now encounter (Cf. Gergen 1991: 69). For one media made people conscious of their common fate, of the absence of a sphere completely 'outside', but media also opened up a window for encountering other people and other customs, for discovering 'new worlds', so to speak. Physically, global media made it possible for human beings to truly become inhabitants of one planet for the first time in history. By linking various parts of the globe into a single 'now', and by putting even the most remote places on earth within reach, media completed the project of 'globalization' for two billion inhabitants of the developed world. By enabling large-scale mobility of goods and people around the globe, by providing education and dispersing information, and by creating social

cohesion, media brought to us the unbelievable wellbeing we experience today in the Western world.

But media not only facilitate life, they also transform it. As Marshall McLuhan boldly stated in the *Sixties*: the medium is the message (McLuhan 1964: 7). This famous mantra of his expresses the crucial insight that the particular type of medium one uses also shapes its content. Form and content cannot be separated: such a thing as the 'neutral' conveyance of information does a message carried across by text message and the same message – which obviously is no longer 'the same' – by a hand-written letter. Electronic messages tend to be shorter, composed in less time, more informal, bullet-like, more direct than written letters; they often call for an immediate reply and are sent with near light-speed. The choice of medium has a huge impact on the tone and style of the message, the speed of communication, the emotional involvement, the way communication between people works, power relations, etcetera. The same applies to media of transport: air traffic belongs to a different world than wooden sailing ships did: a world with different modes of work, cohabitation, politics and economy. Conceiving of oneself as a 'global citizen' and acting accordingly would not be possible without modern media of transport and communication. Just have a look at the introduction of writing some 6,000 years ago for example. Although there were no media scholars around to analyze the changes at the time, we are now able to tell that it did coincide with and partly caused some of the most fundamental transformations in human history in the realm of the modes of human cohabitation and social organisation. It introduced new power relationships – the literate versus the illiterate –, new forms of social stratification, it accelerated urbanization, and it spurred the creation and division of work.

It was not surprising therefore that scholars like McLuhan revealed media as an important part of the message conveyed. Obviously, this influence of media on human conduct and consciousness had existed long before – as long as media existed as a matter of fact – but it had not become recognised as such and for a long time people saw media as kind of neutral serving-hatches of information instead. Since then famous examples of the power of media have been widely commented. In retrospect we became painfully aware how in Nazi-Germany Adolf Hitler cleverly used the airplane in combination with radio broadcasting technology to enchant the German audience and win them over. Never had a leader been so omni-present and so close to his

subjects as Hitler was in the early years of his dictatorship. Another well-known example of media's influence is the televised Kennedy-Nixon debate in the US election of 1960, a debate that clearly showed the supremacy of the image over the word. Whereas radio listeners at the time gave the advantage to Nixon, television viewers clearly proclaimed Kennedy as the winner of the series of debates, eventually going on to the White House. These are only two examples of the mediated nature of all human communication, and the effect any particular type of mediation has on the communicators.

3.4.1.3 Technology

Spurred by these remarks the moment has arrived to make some clarify the concept of 'technology'. Despite the composition of the word 'technology', it would be a gross oversimplification to see technology jus as the 'science' (logos) of technique. Both words – technique and technology - are a derivative of the Greek noun *technè*, meaning 'craft' or 'skill'. I would like to propose two different readings of the concept of technology, in order to clarify my use of it. The first usage could be called an anthropological conception of what technology means. Here the suffix 'logos' is conceived of in its meaning of reason: technology in this case comprises all goal-oriented human action that makes use of some sort of tool. This means we do not only use tools along a process of trial and error, but that we are also capable of deliberately manufacturing tools on the grounds of abstract reasoning to solve problems. Human beings are able to envision an absent reality, conceive of solutions for problems mentally and try to find a way of arriving there as efficiently as possible. Technology encompasses this realm of purposive behaviour.

The second usage refers to the social implications of techniques and sees them primarily as social phenomena. In this reading 'logos' has to be understood in its original sense of 'legein', which means to 'collect' (Cf. Heidegger 2004: 13). Literally: techniques collect people in a certain way, that is, techniques contribute to the organisation of social processes and the structuring of lives. So, instead of seeing them as mere tools, transparant in their use, techniques are considered constituent of social practices, enticing particular kinds of behaviour, involving rules of conduct, tied in

with institutions, and so on. Think for example of how several transportation media helped forming a culture of speed and mobility that locked us in ever deeper and informed numerous practices without which contemporary life would be impossible to imagine. In the following subsections I shall go into one of them – auto-mobility – in more detail and show its origins and working as a technological system. Another telling example of how a rather simple technology was involved in a transformation which yielded far-reaching social consequences, is provided by the assembly belt – in combination with the electrification of industrial processes – that enabled a whole new regime of industrial production centered around standardized output, regular working hours, mass production, speed and a culture of high-capitalism which is organised around profit and efficiency.

I have to insert a caveat here, because I do not want to leave the impression of being a sturdy technological determinist. In order to understand the impact of technology on identity, a very helpful theory in my opinion is offered by Hughes' theory of *technological momentum*. According to Hughes both technological determinism and social constructivism are one-sided, because they overemphasise either the technological artifacts in their impact on society (determinism), or because they overemphasise the socially driven processes of design and interpretation and their impact on technologies (constructivism).[66] Hughes' interactionist approach focuses on the level on which both users and artifacts are actors in a complex process, in which socio-economic, cultural and technological factors are constituted by, and constitutive of other factors. In Hughes' own succinct words: "… technological momentum infers that social development shapes and is shaped by technology" (Hughes in: Smith and Marx 1994: 102). Since both the social and the technical interact within technological systems, for Hughes there remains only one factor outside of the system: the environment. An environment of which one can obviously pose the question to what degree an environment unaffected by technology still exists in this era of grand-scale technical mobilization? The term *momentum* is not chosen by accident: techno*logy* is made up of techniques which, because of their widespread social ramifications, their complexity (they require vast amounts of knowledge, investments and infrastructure)

[66] An endless debate wields in science and technologie studies about the origins of the sociotechnical complex: does technology drive society, or does society drive technology? See for an overview of arguments: Smith and Marx, 1994.

and their sedimentation into several layers of daily life, gained *momentum* of their own. To give a better insight into what technological momentum exactly is, and how (social) freedom and (technological) force interplay, I shall give a brief account of what is probably the most iconic of all technological systems: the car system.

3.4.2 Automobility: *ultimate freedom or compulsive behaviour?*

To remain stationary in these times of change,
When all the world is on the move, would be a crime.
Thomas Cook

Indispensable as it is now, the car may seem a purposive, deliberately planned revolution in transport, carefully timed and grown out of a strong social and economic need, (such as it turned out to be for the past two or three generations). But was it really? Actually, it was far from it. At the time of the 'Big bang of auto-mobility', when in 1886 Benz and Daimler invented the internal combustion engine, the first automobiles were rather conservatively seen as a kind of efficient bicycle or coach. The car suffered under what came to be later known as the *horseless carriage syndrome* (McLuhan): far off from consciously triggering a revolution, its inventors tried to 'optimize the existing', creating a cycle with mechanical propulsion. As was the fate of many new technologies, the German public was difficult to convince of its use. They even saw it as a redundant invention (!) and concerns grew whether the car would be commercially viable.[67]

It was not until some years later in Paris that the idea really took off. The reason is as clear to us as it was clouded to the car's first manufacturers: instead of aiming their attention to the greasy, noisy and complex underlying technology, manufacturers put users in the center of the experience and promotion of cars. Not yet seen, though, as a functional means of transport, the car became popular as a machine for leisure time, for relaxation, enjoyment, for visiting the countryside. It served as a means for demonstrating social superiority and to experience the thrill of speed. Cars entered the

[67] In the first paragraphs of this section I draw heavily upon Wolfgang Sachs' *For love of the automobile*. See: Sachs 1992: 91-124; 188-195.

scene as expressions of identity as they became ‘lifestyle symbols’ for the rich and tokens of courage for daredevils. Flourishing on a culture of speed which rose at the end of the nineteenth century the car was turned into an esthetic object and bought to parade the boulevards. It was only from 1908 onward, when Ford started to mass-produce cars in the US, that the car was dispersed widely and became a common machine in the gamma of transportation means.

There were more and various reasons why the car suddenly did take off in those days, some of which completely mysterious to the contemporary mind. For example, driving was considered healthy! Clean air was breathed, the organism was thought to be in an active state, even the vibrations of the car were said to possess healing powers. A better example of the changing perception of media can hardly be found, since nowadays cars are considered extremely unhealthy (because driving requires no bodily exercise) and highly polluting. What also played a role in the nascent popularity of the car was the art of mastering it and the distinction that followed from it. Driving a car was not easy at all in those early days: there were very few roads, cars broke down regularly and hardly any supply was available. Fuel had to be sent in advance by train. Avoiding other traffic members was an art in itself: streets were littered with people, coaches, bicycles and animals, neither of them familiar with cars. Driving a car was supposed to lead to all sorts of virtues: health, patience, courage, inventiveness, mechanical aptitude; a triumph over the natural elements.

3.4.2.1 The freedom to move

Keep moving! Steam, or Gas, or Stage,
Hold, cabin, steerage, hencoop's cage –
Tour, Journey, Voyage, Lounge, Ride, Walk,
Skim, Sketch, Excursion, Travel-talk –
For move you must! 'Tis now the rage.
The law and fashion of the age.
Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1826)

One distinguishing and novel feature of cars, however, stands high above all the others: cars provide the ultimate sense of freedom to their drivers. In cars the freedom to move is epitomized. Especially in a time when people were condemned to mass-transportation in trains for the undertaking of longer journeys, the car was a true solution for those in disgust of full and filthy trains and fixed timetables. As a commentator in those early days wrote: "We will decide ourselves whether we drive fast or slow, where we stop, where we want to pass through without delay. We will be in the brisk, fresh air for days on end. We will not drive in dark, terrible caves through mountains, but over mountains. In short, gentlemen, we will truly travel, rather than have ourselves transported" (Bierbaum, quoted in Sachs 1992: 95). Sachs, too, agrees that partly the feeling of independence was born out of its contrast to the railway (Sachs 1992: 97).

The feeling of freedom it created was the most important reason for the car to push through and to take a decisive advantage over other mobility systems. Its plusses outweighed its downsides: driving meant freedom from public timetables, freedom of place, the experience of speed, the kick of driving fast. Along with freedom to move came a considerable amount of convenience: the convenience of having a private means of transport, and not depend on others. The car became the symbol of cultural and economic progress, the expression of a culture in which (self)movement, similar to the railroad in mid-nineteenth century, played an increasingly important role.

As I explained in section 1.2.2, in the Enlightenment human freedom came to be explained in terms of the capacity of unrestricted movement. This notion of freedom, which was and still is deemed one of the principle human rights, coincided perfectly

with the new-born services the car offered and was in turn endorsed by it, of which the American car culture forms a striking example. In general one can easily see how media feed this notion of freedom as self-movement: both media of transport and of communication provide us with a sense of mastering nature, of overcoming natural barriers of speed and location. As it comes to executing this supposed right of freedom – freedom to move as well as freedom of speech – it has always been tightly attached to media, ranging from primitive stone tools in slaughtering animals to the web enabling instant world wide communication. Media enable us to put our will into effect.

In conclusion, since the first T-Ford left the assembly belt, cars have not stopped evolving on this path of comfort, convenience and speed. Cars still enjoy unabated popularity, although economic crises and environmental concern may give the old-fashioned car industry a hard time these days. It is not difficult to see why the car has become so central an artifact in our present lives. The list of predicates it merits is almost endless: cars are machines of dreams; objects of desire; symbol of status and objects of prestige; objects of art, lifestyle and the expression of identity; the ultimate embodiment of freedom and individuality; machines of adventure, thrill and enjoyment and machines of sports and competition; handy extensions of our bodies, a kind of natural, second skin in traffic; comfort machines by serving as climatized living room, cinema and music hall; but also objects of habit, frustration, big spending and envy, pollution and political debate (Cf. Sachs 1992; Urry 2007). The car has become deeply ingrained in all aspects of our modern, highly mobile society and woven into the fabric of our daily lives. In 100 years of driving, the car has gained an almost unstoppable momentum.

3.4.2.2 Stuck in traffic again!

The difficulties governments experience with *greening* the transport sector and the very slow introduction of alternatives beyond fossil fuel based vehicles tell a lot about how powerful and dominant the current car system in our society is. As Hughes explained about technological systems, they gain socio-technological momentum as they grow bigger and bigger. Every *mobility system* – as Urry calls it – presupposes both an extended underlying infrastructure facilitating this particular type of transport and a

culture of usage around it. So, the car system entails the car industry, roads, traffic rules, gasoline, mining of resources to build cars, education of drivers, licenses, etcetera. It is one of the biggest industries on the planet, maybe even *the* industry of the twentieth century. Companies such as Ford, Mercedes and Toyota have become some of the iconic firms of capitalist society and probably no single item has had so many hours of research and manufacturing put into it as thet cars they manufacture. One could even say the car industry *is* capitalism. More than one billion cars were manufactured during the past century, it consumes one fifth of all fossil fuels and still car travel is expected to triple between 1990 and 2050 (Urry 2007: 115).

The tentacles of the car system reach into every corner of our lives: it is tied to the fossil fuel industry (mining, refinery, gas stations); it employs millions of people directly or indirectly, tax-revenues generated by it are tremendous; it calls for extended infrastructural facilities; it is at the heart of commuting; we move our goods around by truck and by car; a whole leisure industry has been built around it; and on the list goes. It is a truly all-pervading system, interwoven with almost any aspect of contemporary life, without which modern life as we know it would come to a halt. The car system has grown to a point where it has become almost impossible to tell the car industry and all its technological aspects apart from the social processes it involves: they are completely mixed up. Did we move to suburbs because cars and roads enabled it or did we build cars and roads because we wanted to live in suburbs and needed them to do so?[68]

As we learned from Hughes in the former section, the deeper a system gets anchored in society, the more momentum of its own it gains. Its tentacles grow deeper into all layers of society, it becomes less prone to overturning and its impact on our lives mounts. Systems force their users into their own rhythm so to speak: "Systems increasingly develop in which there is an obligation to be circulating, and this is true of water, sewage, people, money, ideas" (Virilio, cited in Urry 2007: 13). We cannot afford our machines to falter. Urry observes this growing dependence too: "It is the steam engine that begins a long process of human life becoming a life that is irreversibly interconnected with and dependent upon machines. This is what I mean by 'modernity', that moment when enormously powerful machines are imbricated within

[68] To the US this last remark applies. In the UK, on the other hand, suburbs already existed when the car was introduced, due to its early and extended railway system.

human experience. From then on, machines are not something on the side but they serve to constitute a 'human' life that cannot be *lived* without them" (Urry 2007: 93).

The gridlock does not just occur on our highways: our entire lives are held in a stranglehold of compulsory movement and technologized behaviour. An individual might still refuse car-ownership and revert to public transport, but as a society we cannot do away with cars, however high the oil-price is and however steep CO2 emission curves. We live in a culture of mobility and constant acceleration: an entrepreneur refusing to partake is out! The logic of mobility that rules the globe – the constant flow of goods, information and persons - turned auto-mobility into a sheer necessity for survival. The system has 'locked in': the car system is so vast, dominant and there are that much interests at stake, that it is impossible to turn it over quickly. Despite all the contras in terms of environmental damage, it will be the dominant system for many years to come. As observed by Urry, "Billions of agents and thousands of organisations have co-evolved and adapted to that remaking of the system of auto-mobility as it spread like a virus around the globe" (Urry 2007: 117). What started as the freedom to move has turned into compulsive behaviour. Traffic jams are a frustrating symptom of the paradoxical plight we find ourselves in: we move around so much that this movement becomes self-inhibitive. The force that is exerted on us by the car system comes in many guises. With the car system come a lot of aspects that limit our freedom in numerous ways. John Urry therefore calls the car "simultaneously immensely flexible and wholly coercive" (Urry 2007: 119).

One could allege that this paradox is already foreclosed in the word 'auto-mobile' itself. 'Auto' comes in a twofold meaning of auto-mobility as 'self-movement': a vehicle that moves itself and needs no exterior help to do so. As such it can be viewed as a McLuhanesk extension of the human self. But the 'auto' of auto-mobility can also be interpreted as an *automaton*: the car as something autonomous beyond our control. This might not yet apply to the individual car – although experiments with Knight Rideresk cars and busses are being held – but it does apply to the car system in its cultural, economic and social dynamics. As Urry puts it aptly: "Auto-mobility involves the fusion of the humanist, inner directed self as in the notion of autobiography, and of objects or machines that possess the capacity for movement as in something being automatic or an automaton. […] The car driver is as a hybrid assemblage of human competences and will, and machines, roads, buildings, and signs" (Urry 2007: 118).

Wolfgang Sachs speaks of a *dependent independence* in this same context (Sachs 1992: 101).

I shall list some other areas in which the car system has a large bearing on our way of behaviour and freedom of movement. In the first place, the car system goes hand in hand with many *technical affordances*[69]. A car not only requires driving skills and knowledge of traffic rules: modern cars take over an increasing number of actions from their drivers. Think of brake-assistance, automatic gearboxes, automatic lights, etcetera. In general a driver has to drive in a certain, *pre-conditioned* way in order to avoid accidents and keep the engine running and traffic flowing. One cannot pull the wheel or hit the gas pedal whenever one wants. A driver needs to make the car her 'second skin' in which machine and driver become one. Such 'cyborgs' are disciplined to move in certain pre-arranged ways. Just try braking with your left foot and you will know about the conditioning! Road dependence limits our freedom to move: a driver is restricted to roads and needs gas stations.

Handing over actions to cars has the consequence of turning them into moral agents. This applies not only to cars; we increasingly tend to delegate the morally good or the socially desirable to technologies: cars have limited top-speeds, roads are littered with speed ramps, airbags pop up and alarm lights flash if safety belts are not fastened. For reasons of safety and in avoidance of the interruption of traffic flows human behaviour is standardized, made predictable and repetitive. On top of that we are faced with what Urry calls *authority constraints*: legal restrictions on mobility such as forbidden areas, age discrimination and limited opening hours of public services. Also, freedom for car drivers often coincides with impediments for cyclists and pedestrians in terms of space, air quality and safety to move through traffic. Generally, we can observe increasing congestion of our cities and highways turning the freedom into frustration of our desire of unrestricted movement.

Although the car was heralded as liberator of public timetables, it too is bound by social conventions. We are still expected at work at a certain hour; carriers have to deliver their package before 3 o'clock; and if you want to avoid traffic jams, you best drive between 10 am and 3 pm. The railway, to draw a historical analogy, did already

[69] I took the concept 'affordance' from John Urry, who uses it to describe the intrinsic quality of objects to invite people to act upon them with a certain kind of behaviour. For example, a pavement invites us to walk on it. See also: Urry 2007: 50-51.

provide a good example of how a medium induces social pressure on a population by introducing universal time and fixed time zones in 1896. Before the first railway tracks were laid, almost every town had its own time. With the introduction of scheduled train travel, this chronological diversity was no longer tenable. For those travelling between towns by trains, an urgent need for punctuality, precision and calculability rose. Urry quotes Sachs, when he writes: "the station clock meant that 'the cult of punctuality overtook the whole of society'" (Urry 2007: 97). The car meets a manifold of social demands. A lot of people depend on the car for work, social contacts, holidays, shopping, leisure activities, etcetera. Especially the sprawling of our cities – the separation of home space on the one and work and services on the other hand – contributed much to the necessity of having cars at our disposal. For many people the possible loss of their driver's license – because of a violation of traffic rules – is a truly horrendous and devastating prospect.

We may conclude that the car forms a perfect example of a technology that is at the same time liberating and restraining. Its personalized character, speed and convenience of use are paralleled by an increasing number of social pressures, rules and conventions around it. Compare it to what has happened to the mobile phone at the turn of the century: at its introduction it was praised as the ultimate device in terms of mobile communication, the freedom to move and staying 'logged in' at the same time, but it also forced us into a culture of constant reachability, reciprocity in terms of answering phone calls and text messages, and into an 'always on' mentality. The boundaries between private life and professional life become blurred: the 'crackberry' is already allowed in many bedrooms. The car experienced the same kind of fate, be it over a much longer period of time. The car simultaneously is pinnacle of individual mobility, of the democratization of movement, of the freedom of place and time, and part of a mobility-system that created a world wide momentum that will not be stopped for decades to come, and which places its burden on every individual living on his planet. As such, the car is one of many media in a larger process, a process that gained momentum of its own, and that is characterized by a similar paradox of advancing freedom and introducing new forces that impinge on the individual: globalization.

3.4.3 Globalized identities

Your Christ is a Jew. Your car is Japanese.
Your pizza is Italian. Your democracy – Greek.
Your coffee – Brazilian. Your holiday – Turkish.
Your numbers – Arabic. Your letters – Latin.
Only your neighbour is a foreigner.
Poster on the streets of Berlin, 1994

Anthony Giddens pointly observes in relation to globalization: "When the image of Nelson Mandela may be more familiar to us than the face of our next-door neighbour, something has changed in the nature of our everyday experience" (Giddens 2003: 12). Essential feature of the process we are used to call globalization, according to Giddens, is the separation of time and space, or *time-space-distanciation*. Whereas in the past people lived in the *here-and-now*, that is, the coincidence of time and space in one single reality, a number of media appliances have made it possible for us to disconnect time and space, so, being in the now physically, but being elsewhere virtually: communicating, causing an effect, or suffering the consequences from things happening in another location. It has to be said, though, that in the pre-media era, people were able to be somewhere else in fantasy or by memory. Media thrive on our ability to displace ourselves virtually by means of thinking. In the end it is the very same capacity of self-reflexivity, which enables the existence of self-identity as as well the use of media.

As I stated earlier in section 3.4.1.2, media of communication and media of transport have brought the whole of the globe within reach. Although distance still matters - flying to Australia easily takes a European citizen a day - we owe it to media such as telephones, internet, airplanes and satellites that the constraints of time and space have been taken away to a considerable extent.[70] If, for instance, natural disaster was to strike in Indonesia in the year 1500 AD, then the knowledge of the event appeared maybe two months later in Europe, when the first vessels arrived and spread the

[70] Apart from geographical distance, also economic distance is still an important barrier between people: many digital divides prevail on the basis of the lack of access and purchasing power. Especially in the developing countries a lot of people are not *online* yet. The access to media is very unevenly spread around the world.

message. In present times, on the other hand, we learn immediately about what is going on all over the globe and we may even see the images in real time on news sites. That is what globalization does to us. A process that did not start recently according to Giddens, but evolved gradually over many media starting with the prime medium of human language: "language is the prime and original means of time-space distanciation, elevating human activity beyond the immediacy of the experience of animals" (Giddens 1991: 23). After all, we can speak of things that are not immediately present but have taken place in the past or in our fantasy.

When did globalization start then? Is it a recent phenomenon and should we link it to modern technologies of communication and mobility or can we trace it all the way back to the origins of human language as in the explanation above? The word *globalization* itself is in vogue since the 1960s, when it first appeared in economic contexts (Cf. Shirato & Webb 2003:2; Waters 1995: 2). Apart from its actual use as a word though, several theories circulate on the beginnings of globalization. Peter Sloterdijk, for example, distinguishes three different historical stages of globalization. The first one is what he calls *morphological* globalization; a form of globalization he traces in classical philosophy and theology, as intellectuals tried to grasp the whole of the cosmos in round, sphere-like concepts. The second stage Sloterdijk discerns is made up of the history of *terrestrial* globalization; beginning with Columbus' discovery of the Americas in 1492, this periods extends to 1945 and marks the physical discovery, mapping and knitting together of the various parts of the world, particularly as a consequence of European expansion. Finally, since the Second World war, we entered the era of *electronic* globalization (Sloterdijk 2005: 20-29).

In a similar vein, Malcolm Waters specifies three possible ways to date the beginning of globalization. One way is to see it in process since the dawn of history, with a sudden and recent acceleration. Another theory sees globalization cotemporal with modernization and the development of capitalism, and again, with a recent acceleration. The third way to look at globalization is to understand it as a recent phenomenon associated with other social processes called postindustrialization, postmodernization or the disorganisation of capitalism (Waters 1995: 6-7).

Pushing these theories on the nature and origins of globalization further from the viewpoint of media technologies, another triade can be added. I think *Grosso modo* three big waves of globalization can be discerned, all directly linked to milestone

discoveries in the field of media. In the first place there was the invention of writing, which made 'absent presence' possible: detailed communication, *actio in distans*, wielding influence over large areas such as the Roman Empire or the empire of Alexander the Great were some of the first examples of it. The concomitant spread of the wheel and advanced shipbuilding lead to the first stage of 'world trade' in the Mediterranean area. The second wave of globalization started around the fifteenth century with the invention of the art of printing, which eased the dissemination of knowledge, coinciding with the grand era of voyages of discovery, when European sailors roamed the globe and explored it physically. Magellan's circumnavigation of the earth can be seen as the first true proof of the 'global' nature of our planet. It marked the beginning of an era of European expansion, military dominance and colonial exploitation.

The third wave struck at the end of the nineteenth century and triggered the tsunami of globalization that was to follow in the twentieth century. The invention of a gamut of communication and transportation media such as the telegraph, electricity, the internal combustion engine, and later aviation and modern telecommunications and computing systems accelerated the process of globalization to the point we know it today. After 1990 especially, as we entered the post-cold war era, the process of globalization was accellerated even more. The hunger for ever more connections between people, countries and continents, more profit and more fancy gadgets continues to push technological innovations further ahead. Globalization and modern media technologies co-evolved in an ongoing history of relentless economic expansion, demographic growth and migration, connectivity and interdependency. With the rise of the world wide web, the explosion of global trade, rapidly expanding, cheap air traffic, further integration of financial markets and the bringing online of hitherto closed markets, we truly entered the *network society*.

In the light of my research, I align myself authors like Waters, Sloterdijk and Giddens in their emphasis on the reflexive dimension of globalization, which ties it historically to the modern period. As a reflexive process globalization could not arrive before the Copernican Revolution and other important discoveries in the early modern age; all of them learning humanity that it inhabited one globe. It was also in this particular period that the linear extension of globalization – tightly attached to the technologies I discussed above - experienced till the present day began (Cf. Waters 1995: 7). To quote

Waters by means of a summary: "We can therefore define globalization as: a social process in which the constraints of geography on economic, political, social and cultural arrangements recede, in which people become increasingly aware that they are receding and in which people act accordingly" (Waters 1995: 5). The key terms in this comprehensive definition by Waters are 'aware' and 'act accordingly'. Both point toward a stage where globalization has become reflexive: people are conscious of the profound changes the world experiences and gear their behaviour to this new situation. Companies perform global marketing, groups of dissatisfied citizens construct resistance identities, and on the political and legal level a human rights discourse has been adopted.

One thing can certainly be said: globalization made the world shrink. Places that belonged to the vast and unknown *terra incognita* only a couple of centuries ago are now scrutinized by geologists to give away their hidden treasures of oil and gold and tourists swarm over their beaches. Globalization is the ongoing process that closely ties the world's regions together and makes them interdependent in terms of economy (finance, labor, trade, resources), culture (the exchange of ideas, customs and lifestyles), politics (the formation of transnational institutions and the global dialogue between nations) and even biology (the migration of species, gene technology). Put less academically: globalization means driving an Asian car, which runs on oil from the Middle East, to a French restaurant, to eat an Argentinean stake and have an Ethiopian coffee afterwards, while in Africa millions of children are starving. Now, how does all of this impact our identity?

3.4.3.1 Identity between the local and the global

In *Modernity and self-identity* Anthony Giddens (1991) puts forward the question how people maintain their sense of personal identity in a globalizing world. He sees multiple dilemmas of identity arising that are directly linked to the process of globalization (Cf. Giddens 1991: chapter 6). First, there is the dilemma of *unification* versus *fragmentation*. On the one side the regions of the world are becoming increasingly homogenized in terms of culture and consumerism; on the other side we can witness growing individualism and the fragmentation of experiences, scattered over a wide

range of possible lifestyles, geographical places and social environments. The second dilemma Giddens mentions is the one of *powerlessness* versus *appropriation*. The domestication of sophisticated technology and communication media gives us the feeling of increased mastery over nature and of grip on our own lives. On the contrary we know ourselves to be part of global processes that transcend the powers of the individual; economic, social and ecological events that seem to unfold in line with their own, autonomous logic, beyond our control. As an individual I am confronted, for instance, with a scale of investment options for my savings that is unheard of in history, but simultaneously I depend on an opaque global financial system for its revenues and stability, a system beyond my realm of influence.

Thirdly, Giddens points at a discrepancy between *personalised* and *commodified* experience. On the one hand we could, with Lieven de Cauter, call capitalism the 'transcendental' of contemporary society: the capitalistic logic of making profit, individualism, growth and efficiency pervades almost any aspect of modern life and has become the pre-condition for its thriving (Cf. De Cauter 2004: 41-49). On the other hand this logic forces individuals to develop their own lifestyles, to write their own biography, to make their own choices in life, choices though that are already conditioned by a capitalistic economy. Giddens speaks of 'the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life' (Giddens 1991: 198). One could call this dilemma the homogeneous obligation for heterogeneity in an economically homogenized world. Globalization not only causes global cultural homogeneity but even so more diversity. The global supermarket of identity resources we can shop in has widened enormously due to the use of global media. Before the age of high-speed transportation and instant, broadband communication devices, cultures were much more homogeneous in themselves due to a lack of exterior input. In these days media offer a platform for almost any cultural expression, however minor the land or group of origin may be. In this sense the use of modern media is telling for a person's identity: am I a couch-potato who discovers the planet through the Discovery Channel or am I a hypermobile businessman who travels the continents armed with laptop and blackberry? In *The Saturated Self* Kenneth Gergen warns us for a possible downside of this wealth of identity resources, pointing at the risk of *saturation*, where an individual is typically in internal conflict: for each belief there exists a strong countertendency (Cf Gergen 1991: 72). We can add globalization to the list of factors that caused what he called

multiphrenia – the splitting of the individual into a multitude of self-investments – by so greatly expanding the amount of information we have to deal with, the networks we participate in, the lifestyle options and all localities we live and work in.

Finally, modern human beings find themselves in tension between living *locally* and being part of *global networks* and a global information system at the same time. On this last point and its implications for our identity I shall elaborate a bit more and go beyond Giddens' text. As I declared earlier, globalization involves the decrease of distances, both physically and in terms of communication. The 'outer world' (the global) now intrudes the inner circles of our quotidian lives (the local). It does so on many levels: news about events happening in the rest of the world reaches us with light-speed and high accuracy; products from all corners of the world are displayed for our delectation in the supermarkets we visit; people from countries all over the world inhabit our cities and bring their customs along; diseases travel the globe by ship and plane and wreak havoc in regions they were naturally never designed to exist.

As Marshal McLuhan showed in *Understanding Media* (1994), pre-electric media such as ships and writing caused the world to explode at first – the world grew bigger and bigger during the past centuries as we learned more about it – but to implode under the influence of electric media from the end of the nineteenth century onward. Whereas writing could be portrayed as a unilateral medium – one was able to wield influence over distance without suffering immediate consequences, if at all – electric media on the other hand brought bilaterality with them (Cf. McLuhan 1994: 3-4; 35; 81-88; 247-257). In a world that is becoming ever more globalized, these feedback loops become ever tighter, hence the impact of globalization on our identities mounts. On our television screens we watch starving African children with big, round bellies; we watch an earthquake destroy thousands of lives in China; we watch the felling of the Brasilian rainforest in order to meet our demand for bio-fuels.

In the old days the locality of an event determined whether it was to make it to the newspapers: only what occurred in the known vicinity and had a direct, local bearing on their lives was of interest to people. For ages people lived locally, at best regionally, as well in terms of subsistence as in their social lives. Nowadays newspapers round up 24 hours of global news footage, hardly drawing a line between what happens in town or at the opposite end of the world. A lot of people know more about the private lives of their prime minister these days than of their neighbour's. The traditional 'sphere' –

to use a metaphor by Peter Sloterdijk – surrounding us, a sphere locally based and offering existential security and social stability, has become porous. Thanks to a broad spectrum of media that flush our societies, from cars to satellites, mobile phones, money and the web, modern Europeans depend on the Tokyo stock exchange for their pensions and a tsunami in Indonesia puts our solidarity to the test. A moral appeal speaks from such images and saddles us with new problems. How should I treat disasters happening elsewhere, far beyond my immediate doorstep? Should I feel guilty? Should I ignore them? Should I donate money? A global phenomenon such as climate change, faces us with the responsibility we bear towards future generations and the need for sustainable development. In an age of global media people are forced to find the right balance between letting the world enter or shutting it out, between jumping into action or continuing business as usual.

We do not live in closed units any longer, units at worst are threatened or challenged by a deity or natural disruptions. The *protective cocoon* (Giddens) that villages, tribes or families once constituted, has turned into a mobile, volatile and temporary capsule at best. The world as a whole has become the new unit of reference. Globalization by its nature affects everybody on this planet and puts tremendous strain on modern individuals. The changing experience of space and time, the global economy and labour market, the proliferation of (Western) human rights, cultural Westernization, worldwide access to information, the evaporation of economic and physical borders between countries and the entwinement and interdependence of cultures, economies and political institutions; all these aspects of globalization have far-reaching effects on the daily lives of billions of people around the world. In the past people lived on the same planet; now we live in one world. In his prologue to a compendium on globalization, German social scientist and ecologist Wolfgang Sachs describes how this new world consciousness conquers our identities (conceived of as self-consciousness) by feeding our awareness of global interdependencies and the need to act accordingly. The image, fed by media, of planet earth as one big, interlinked system of which we are all part, makes our cognitive and moral coordinates of self-conception drift towards a new self-definition as responsible agents. That explains how all of a sudden driving a car can be linked to global warming and deemed morally abject. Sachs holds the opinion that the birth of a global community (*Weltgesellschaft*) may very well count as

the pre-eminent mark of our time (Sachs 2005: 18). It can safely be stated that globalization is the dominant cultural and socio-economic force of the moment.

In his book on modern identity, Anthony Giddens explains modern identity as a reflexive project against the background of this dialectic between the local and the global, between individuality and (new) social institutions, and between chances and fewer existential certainties (Cf. Giddens 1991: 33). The paradox of identities in times of globalization is that both elements play their part in peoples' self-conceptions: they tend to see themselves as global citizens but still experience a strong tendency to 'encapsulate' and affirm their local identity. Zygmunt Bauman, too, is aware of this paradox, one that is often overlooked in the heralding of globalization and its blessings, namely the one that people tend to erect new boundaries to compensate for the dwindling of other boundaries incurred by globalization. "As Jonathan Friedman put it, in our globalizing world 'one thing that is not happening is that boundaries are disappearing. Rather, they seem to be erected on every new street corner of every declining neighbourhood of our World'" (Bauman 2001: 152).

In this same vein there have been writings on the emergence of so-called *diasporic* identities. The Indian anthropologist Arjun Appadurai, for example, writes in his famous book *Modernity at large*: "As Turkish guest workers in Germany watch Turkish films in their German flats, as Koreans in Philadelphia watch the 1988 Olympics in Seoul through satellite feeds from Korea, and as Pakistani cabdrivers in Chicago listen to cassettes of sermons recorded in mosques in Pakistan or Iran, we see moving images meeting deterritorialized viewers. These create diasporic public spheres, phenomena that confound theories that depend on the continued salience of the nation-state as the key arbiter of important social change" (Appadurai 2005: 4).

It speaks for itself that without modern media of transport and communication those diasporic identities would be inconceivable: without air traffic, radio, television and th world wide web keeping communities all over the globe upright, the connection to the home country would inevitably faint. Modern communication technologies facilitate diasporic communities to keep in close touch to their cultures of origine (Cf. Winter, Thomas & Hepp 2003: 103). Media mediate identity resources 'translocally' (Winter, Thomas & Hepp 2003: 12). Identities are reflexively formed in a kind of 'in between' space, in which persons transgress the boundaries of nations or regions thanks to the input offered to them by media. As far as the role of media is concerned, national

identity is an early form of a translocal identity, because of its constituency as an 'imagined community' (Anderson 2006), going beyond face to face contact, and dependent on mediatic representations. National identity has always been informed by media, which started out in the nineteenth century with the use of newspapers, trains and telegraphs. Nowadays television obviously is the most important broadcasting medium in forging national communities (Cf. Winter, Thomas & Hepp 2003: 98). Yet, as opposed to this traditional, territorial form of identity (although it is already mediatic!) global, digital media delivered the means for deterritorialized, neo-tribal and diasporic identities. According to Hepp the globalization of media-communication leads to deterritorial identities in the fields of ethnicity (diasporic), commerce (neo-tribalism) and politics (new social movements) (Hepp in: Winter, Thomas & Hepp 2003: 12).

In analogy to what has been explained in chapter three about the human need for familiarity, intimacy and the creation of 'cocoons' of comfort and trust, it appears that the need for local anchorage of lives prevails even in a time when we enjoy the benefits of progressing globalization. Manuel Castells points at this paradox of people who withdraw into their familiar, local environments to stand up against the storm of globalization: in the end "most human experience, and meaning, are still locally based" (Castells II 2004: 182). As traditional identities, such as national identities or religious identities, may experience a decline in authority, new group identities are built and new borders are drawn. The search for identity becomes thus a natural companion of globalization.

On the other hand, is it not the case that people develop cosmopolitan identities as well, rather than retreat into local sources of meaning, as Castells suggested? An example of such 'global identities' will be offered in chapter 5 in the case study about green blogs, where the web clearly contributes to a growing global consciousness of our ecological predicament. Media obviously work both ways: they can serve to reinforce our sense of the local, media might transform the 'local' by extending it, or they further processes of globalization. Therefore we conclude that the supposed opposition of the local and the global in fact is more of a paradox: they really are part of the same phenomenon of the pervasiveness of media in our societies. Given the analysis of identity so far in these opening chapters, what are the main paradoxes pertaining to contemporary identity?

3.5 The three paradoxes of (late)modern identity

> In a liquid modern setting of life, identities are perhaps the most common, most acute, most deeply felt and troubleshooter incarnations of *ambivalence*. This is, I would argue, why they are firmly placed at the very heart of liquid modern indviduals' attention and perched at the top of their life agendas.
>
> *Zygmunt Bauman*

If one takes a close look at modern (Western) identity, one sees that it is wrought with contradictions. We want to develop a highly original personal identity, yet we want to belong to a larger group as well. We want to detach ourselves form fixed, sometimes oppressive categories, yet we want to feel attached to a larger whole too. We want to choose and develop ourselves in freedom, yet keep phrasing identities as a higher order imposition: by birth (genes), by blood (national culture), by vocation, by social status. We deny having a stable, unchanging identity, but cannot dispose of the need for familiarity and continuity. We have become highly self-reflective, casting doubt on every supposed truth, yet know a constant landscape-gardening of the self to be utterly unbearable. On the one hand we have suspended belief in all-encompassing, universal doctrines about life, but on the other there is still a strong need for explanation and consolation. To a large degree we look upon identity as genetically given, but simultaneously we acknowledge identities to be social constructs hence pliable and alterable during the course of lives.[71] If we now overview the contradictions the first three chapters yielded, we may categorize them into three major paradoxes, which lie at the heart of the modern, Western narrative on personal identity.

First of all, we can view human identity in the light of the clash between autonomous and heteronomous behaviour. There is the apprehension, mainly stemming from the Enlightenment, of human beings as self-conscious, rational and autonomous creatures, contested by the Romantic view of human beings as being driven by (often unconscious) moods, feelings and incentives, resisting conscious control. On top of

[71] I owe some of these insights to my colleague Michiel de Lange.

that, theories which emphasise the role cultural factors play with regard to identity construction have gained weight in particular in the second half of the twentieth century. There is growing awareness of the deep impact environments, socially scripted situations, upbringing, education, media and peers have on human conduct and self-perception. Both in psychological and sociological studies the evidence for how little we are in control of our own actions mounts up (Cf. Wilson 2002: 43-66). Identities then become (flexible) products of biological causes, the social activities we engage in and the cultural biases that are imprinted upon us, and their influence on how we feel, act and judge. This view is contested by the classical one of seeing human beings as deciding freely on who they want to be and how they want to behave. On another level, we encountered this very same paradox of autonomy and heteronomy in the former section on technology and globalization. Just think back of all the ways the car turned out to be liberating but also constraining our behaviour. In terms of personal identities, this paradoxical process of a growing (global) space for autonomous behaviour, and the simultaneous spread of heteronomic forces in regard to the construction and experience of identities equally prevails.

Autonomy literally means living by one's own laws. We can distinguish three types of autonomy: moral autonomy, that is, putting oneself under self-conceived moral laws. Political autonomy, that is, govern oneself (e.g. democratic governance). And personal autonomy, that is, shaping one's life in freedom. As we already saw in chapter 1, in the age of humanism and Enlightenment the subject climbed center stage: the 'inner world' had been discovered as moral and epistemological source. It was particularly Descartes who, like we saw in section 1.2, planted the seed of human freedom, which from thereon started an astounding uprising into becoming the moral sunflower of human dignity.

Yet, in the very same context we can distinguish three types of heteronomy (literally: living by another's laws). The first type disputes human autonomy by pointing at elusive inner forces, forces of biological or psychological nature. The other type negates autonomy by pointing at outer forces, forces of social or cultural nature. The third one is heteronomy caused by technologization and the (implicit) maxims of conduct technologies entail. Especially in the Romantic era the view of an inner voice, the voice of nature, and the power of feelings gained a lot of popularity. If one takes a close look at popular culture, such as it is performed on television or in magazins, one

gets the impression 'feeling' has become the ultimate moral touchstone. It has become the final, unexplicable ground for making decisions: something is good if it feels good. Kenneth Gergen sees in this the beginning of a culture in search of depth and emotional richness.

> "To summarize, much of our contemporary vocabulary of the person, along with associated ways of life finds its origins in the romantic period. It is a vocabulary of passion, purpose, depth, and personal significance [...] It places love in the forefront of human endeavours, praising those who abandon the 'useful' and the 'functional' for the sake of others. It fosters a belief in deep dynamics of personality – marriage as a "communion of souls," family as bonded in love, and friendship as a lifetime committent" (Gergen 1991: 27).

Romanticism meant a longing for community, but also for self-expression and emotional expenditure; a longing for community with nature, but also an attempt to transcend it (the sublime, the cult of the genius); Romanticism meant celebrating feelings as a moral compass. The ages of Enlightenment and Romanticism saddled us with this hybrid anthropological and ethical discourse of viewing human beings as rational, self-responsible and autonomous actors, and at the same time as driven by uncontrolable forces (think of Schopenhauer's *Wille* or Freud's subconscious), who grant a lot of weight to their feelings and impulses. Some hundred pages later Gergen eloquently lists some of the paradoxes of the modern identity: "We seem to be machinelike, but with a spiritual side; biologically determined, but in possession of conscious control; fundamentally motivated toward self-gain, but even more fundamentally motivated by high ideals; sheeplike creatures who are slavishly dependent on the mass media, but drawn deeply toward goals of uniqueness and independence" (Gergen 1991: 119).

A lot of Westerners nowadays live with the Romantic idea that somewhere deep concealed in them there is a metal box containing their true identity, turning their lives into the quest of the proper key to open this magic box and discover who they really are. Although this view is disputed widely within the scientific community, it still lies at the heart of a powerful discourse with tremendous societal implications. Take the examples of two (future) lovers. After the first stage of physical attraction the stage

arrives of 'getting to know' one another. The stage of discovering what kind of person the other 'really is': which type of personality, ideas about life, what kind of habits, and so on. Saying the words 'I love you' is preceded by a lot of laborious conversation. In modern relationships every detail of someone's personality is made transparent and scrutinized: one lives in front of a constant mirror while performing reciprocal assessment-sessions. The partner's true identity is supposed to lie somewhere deep within and has to be carved out first before embarking the love boat.

Simultaneously, a strong urge prevails in our culture to explain our personality traits and behaviour scientifically and move the burden of accountability away from the subject. Naturalistic approaches to mental matters are very much in vogue lately. In case of psychological deviances – say, for example, a case of paedophilia – it has become hard not to explain them in terms of mental illnesses, deficient genes or youth traumas. The fact that someone simply was 'wrong', for no particular reason, is accepted less and less. Identities are increasingly used to justify behaviour or made choices: 'I couldn't have behaved differently, since this is what I am!'

The second paradox consists therein that we seem to be split, more than ever nowadays, between the (selfish) wish for self-expression and personal growth on the one, and the need for communication and community-building on the other hand. I shall call this contradiction *individuality versus collectivity*. As Jones states: "It is as if a fault line exists and two sides grate against each other; on one side is social convention, the community, the force that binds us together as social beings, and on the other is individualism, the dictum that we should just be our 'selves' (provided we can discover what that is) irrespective of outside forces" (Jones 1997: 27).

In his book *The individualized society*[72] Zygmunt Bauman addresses the same paradox. He explains in what sense we should grasp modern individuality: "What the idea of 'individualization' carries is the emancipation from the ascribed, inherited and inborn determination of his or her social character: a departure rightly seen as a most conspicuous and seminal feature of the modern condition. To put it in a nutshell, 'individualization' consists in transforming human 'identity' from a 'given' into a 'task'" (Bauman 2001: 144). Ironically it is because of their 'dis-embedding', the loss of traditional social and moral contexts, that individuals are prompted to a frantic

[72] Bauman, *The individualized society*, Cambridge, 2001.

search for ‘re-embeddeness’. Identity then “owes the attention it attracts and the passions it begets to being a *surrogate of community* […] Identity sprouts on the graveyard of communities, but flourishes thanks to its promise to resurrect the dead” (Bauman 2001: 151).

Peter Sloterdijk strikingly described our predicament with the concept of ‘co-isolation’ (Sloterdijk 2004: 56). Modern apartment buildings are exemplary of a life in which (in the big cities at least) we are divided by no more than a few inches of wall yet socially live miles apart. It is a common phenomenon for people living in modern cities to know their neighbours’ favourite tv-shows, listen unsollicited to their music and scent their cooking without having so much of a clue of their names. Sloterdijk compares modern societies to the material of *foam*, existing of countless connected, but at the same time isolated bubbles, – remember Giddens’ cocoons – as a metaphore for the social state of modern citizens. In his recent book on the city Jan-Hendrik Bakker sees the modern city as the site where the opposition of the individual and the collective materialised in the form of appartement blocks (Bakker 2008: 37). Life in the cities became more anonymous, more free, but also more indivdual and more lonely. The bigger the city, the more people live together, the bigger the isolation so it seems.

In the next chapters we will see that modern communication technologies push this opposition even further. The world wide web in particular – with its tendency of encapsulating and uniting people at the same time – is a paradigmatic playground for this tension in the modern moral. On the web we are more than ever caught between these two tendencies of individualisation and capsulation on the one, and communication and community-building on the other hand. The web is both a source of reflexive uncertainty and computer-mediated isolation, and serves as a new, high-tech layer of social cement.

Finally, ever since the phenomenon of identity is under scrutiny, the debate is held whether identities are fixed or mobile. For one we still believe in the idea of a fixed, stable personality, hidden somewhere in the depth of our soul. Neurological research, for example, has shown clearly that people in fact do have certain genetic dispositions as far as their personalities and behavioural dispositions are concerned. On a daily basis it is even unimaginable not to suppose some sort of core personality that pervades all the social roles we play. Human interaction would become impossible altogether if we

were to lose the ability to predict the behaviour of others to a certain degree. Yet, simultaneously, we are well aware of the instable nature of our identities, both chronologically as well as spatially. As Ricoeur tried to indicate by using the concept of narrative, we all know from experience that identities are in motion during the course of a life and that every social situation requires different behaviour and makes us pick up different roles.

3.5.1 Conclusion: identity

The purpose of this chapter was to give an impression of the history and content of Western identities and sketch the contours of the current identity discourse.[73] Above all, all the various examples and theories of identity lead to the conclusion that in late modernity identity has become a highly reflexive project (Cf. Giddens 1991: 21; 32). People are compelled to ask (self-reflexive) questions as to who they are and how they want to lead their lives. Yet, although reflexion has become the transcendental of the late modern identity, it seems that we lead our lives still guided by ideas stemming form the ages of Humanism, Enlightenment, Romanticism and Positivism. From Charles Taylors´ *Sources of the self* we can extract the main sources of modern morality, hence of our identity. According to Taylor these are: the classical turn inward - the human being as a reasonable, autonomous subject; sentiments as moral source; the utilitarian pursuit of happiness; and the affirmation of ordinary life. The list of modern values – which are canonical and institutionalised ideas on the good life – springing from these moral sources is dazzling. To mention a few of them: freedom, safety, responsibility, mobility, entertainment, transparancy, health, fitness, credibility, honesty, equality, authenticity, justice, happiness, love, pleasure, community, altruism, benevolence, respect, well-being, comfort, loyalty, personal growth, self-expression, creativity, self-esteem. Summarizing, these values could be grouped into two categories: societal values, values securing the quality of community life, the rules of

[73] I would like to emphasise that the picture I drew in this chapter is first and foremost a *Western* picture, conscious of the fact that even supposing the existence of so called 'Western' countries is a bit anachronistic, since all of these countries are suffused with influences of non-Western cultures and have mixed populations.

social conduct; individual values, values concerning the well-being and thriving of the individual. This list, which is far from complete, shows the ambivalence of modern views on good life, hence the versatility of modern identity.

In the quote below Taylor lays bare the fundamental schizophrenia of the modern worldview:

> "The result for us has been a split-screen vision of nature. On one side is the vast universe which scientific discovery continually reveals, huge and in some ways baffling, stretching far beyond our imaginative powers in both the gigantic and the miniscule; indifferent to us and strangely other, though full of unexpected beauty and inspiring awe. On the other side is the nature whose pulse we feel within, with which we can feel ourselves out of alignment and with which we can aspire to be in attunement. How these two are to be related is deeply problematical" (Taylor 1989: 416).

The quote exemplifies the clash of romanticist and positivist conceptions of nature. The gist of Taylor's analyses is precisely this convergence of multiple historical sources in (in)forming the modern identity. Not only Taylor, but also commentators like Giddens and Gergen share this opinion. As a result of which we are saddled with "… a sense of self defined by the powers of disengaged reason as well as of the creative imagination, in the characteristically modern understandings of freedom and dignity and rights, in the ideals of self-fulfilment and expression, and in the demands of universal benevolence and justice" (Taylor 1989: 503).

Part 2

Playfulness

Chapter 4
Playing and gaming

4.1 Wanna play a game?

> Alle heiligen Spiele der Kunst sind nur ferne Nachbildungen von dem unendlichen Spiele der Welt, dem ewig sich selbst bildenden Kunstwerk
>
> *Friedrich Schlegel*

We usually have little difficulty determining whether someone is *playing*. Apart from the apparent joy that goes with it, it is easy to read the signs of playful conduct: submersion into another reality, one where different rules apply, that has goals of its own, that maybe has an element of competition in it; but also the perseverence and determination of playing the game as well as possible. But human beings are not the only creatures who are said to engage in play. When we witness puppies or kittens fooling around, tossing and tumbling on top of each other, biting, scratching and pulling each others' leg, we do not hesitate to shout out 'Oh look how adorable they're playing with each other!'. Even non-living phenomena are sometimes called play, as there is the playing of light or waves. If we add to that the vast amount of expressions and sayings involving the concept of play, then the vast range of applications of this concept becomes apparent. This makes the question all the more pressing, why it is that we call so diverse a spectrum of behaviours all *play*? If there is such a wide range of phenomena and activities described as play, then what is their common denominator? What minimal characteristics do they all have in common as to merit the label 'play'?

4.1.1 The concept of play

How hard it is to pin down the phenomenon of play unequivocally, is evident from the literature on play. Sutton-Smith aptly describes the problem in his book *The ambiguity of play*: "Although most people throughout history have taken for granted their own play, and in some places have not even had a word for it, since about 1800 in Western society, intellectuals of various kinds have talked more or less systematically and more or less scientifically about play, and have discovered that they have immense problems in conceptualizing it. Presumably this is in part because there are multiple kinds of play and multiple kinds of players" (Sutton-Smith 2001: 6).

The ambiguity surrounding the concept of play originates right at its source. It is well documented that what we now indicate as playful has a double source in ancient Greek society (Cf. Huizinga 1950, Frasca 1999, Caillois 2001). On the one hand it can be traced back to the phenomenon called *paidea*, referring to a kind of 'prodigality of physical or mental activity which has no immediate useful objective, nor defined objective, and whose only reason to be is based in the pleasure experienced by the player' (Frasca 1999: 5). The other connotation is the one of *ludus* (which would be called a *game* now), which is a particular kind of *paidea*, defined as an 'activity organised under a system of rules that defines a victory or a defeat, a gain or a loss' (Ibidem). Or as Frasca also puts it in the same article: games have a result, play does not.

'Ludus' is obviously no Greek word; neither is it an original Latin one. Nevertheless, it has become common place among scholars to use the concept of *ludus* in order to describe this particular kind of playing. The Greeks probably called these types of activities *agon*. Also, *ludus* and *paidea* are certainly not in opposition to each other: by definition, every game contains playful elements, that is, there is an element of free, transformative play involved. I introduce this distinction for being able to describe actions as play (paidea), which are not commonly seen as games, but which are still accompanied by free, playful elements. In the case of actual games, one can think of open-ended games such as *Grand Theft Auto*.

The classic definition of play, offered by Johan Huizinga, is as follows:

> "Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activiy connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means" (Huizinga 1950: 13).

From this definition Roger Caillois deducts the following traits of play (Caillois 2001: 9-10)[74]:

1) It is a free activity. Freedom here means that it concerns a voluntary, non-obligatory action.

2) It is conducted separate from ordinary life: within its own limits of space and time. When looking at the execution of a playful activity itself it strikes that it often involves both an element of repeatability and an element of oscillation. The temporal linearity that normal reality is ruled by seems less pervasive and has given way to a more circular experience of time. More so, although all playing comes to an end at a certain moment, there is always the possibility of playing again. If play were a unique, unrepeatable activity, it would no longer be distinct from 'normal reality' in all its transitoriness. The genre of games has the peculiar feature of inviting players to play over and over again. In Ingeborg Heidemann's words: "… the goal of a game is not the arrival, but being on the way" (Heidemann 1968: 72)[75]. Therefore, play is frequently associated with the figure of a circle. It forms a self-contained unity, and as such is a symbol of fullness an perfection. When we look at play itself, as an activity severed from ordinary life, then it forms a meaningful totality in which every player plays a specified role.

[74] In *Man, play and games* Roger Caillois distincts four types of play (Caillois 2001):
1) Agon: competition. 2) Alea: chance and fate. 3) Mimicry: creating an illusional, imaginary universe. Drama, film, carnival, parades. 4) Ilinx: vertigo. Sensation seeking, ecstacy, experience. Dance, rituals, danger, amusement parks.

[75] Author's translation.

3) Play has a high degree of uncertainty (about the outcome) attached to it: its course cannot be pre-determined. 4) Play is unproductive: it creates no goods or (direct) wealth and serves its own end. Play is said to be no technical, that is to say, no functional activity: it stands outside the realm of functional relationships, it functions not as means to some other end.[76] The goals of playing lie beyond the sphere of direct material interest of its players. The goals of playing can be as diverse as winning the game, experiencing the thrill that accompanies the playing or the beauty of mastering a certain skill. The activity of playing contains a – what we could call – 'immanent teleology': the elements of play are organised in a way as to enable the play to unfold and realize the goals that accompany it. Because it stands outside the teleological order of normal life and defines its own goals, play is sometimes said to create a world of its own. A world which offers its players a way to transgress the boundaries, to escape the dealings of ordinary life, and delightfully submerge in a world of selflessness, a world the pleasure of which increases by the degree to which one enters the play-world.

5) Play of the type of games is governed by rules. Games typically involve some kind of competition. Consequently, it is a way of displaying superiority over others, be it in terms of physical strength, intelligence, aptitude or play-tactics. To do so, it needs rules. Rules determine the playing field, they determine what tools belong to a game, they determine who is a player and they determine who the best player is. In order to understand a game one needs to be initiated into its rules. Within the manifold of play-forms the rules tell all these different types apart. We could deem the set of rules belonging to a game its apriori: they are a game's pre-condition and are beyond contestation. To the player rules are absolute. If the rules are violated, then either someone loses, or the play-world collapses entirely. As Heidemann writes about this feature of games: "Playing-rules cannot be cancelled out without annihilating the game. They cannot be converted or modified without transforming the whole playing-domain. They don not permit negation and resist turning them into an object of play. They are beyond doubt and absolute, one cannot play with them, but only according to them, under their law" (Heidemann 1968: 60).[77] The rules not only delineate a game, they also provide it a goal. This goal obviously has to be realizable within the limits of the game. A computer game, for example, that is technically unplayable will not sell many

[76] Although we all know the spin-off from disciplines like sports to be gigantic nowadays.
[77] Author's translation.

copies. 6) Play always contains an element of make-believe: it is accompanied by an awareness of a second reality against real life. By playing we engage in our 'second lives'; a world in which we transgressed the boundary between being and appearance, between the serious and the playful.

4.2 Playing and gaming

Writing about play is always in danger of falling prey to a confusion of terms. What exactly is play and when do we call something a game? What is the difference between them? What is *playful* behaviour? In the following sections I shall try to establish some clarity in this matter by considering some existing notions which one often encounters in the literature on play.

In *Truth and Method* Hans-Georg Gadamer analyses art works by viewing them as games, as an interpretative frame to show the autonomy of works of art. Gadamer states that playing always means *being played.* The game (the art work) becomes master over the players and absorbs them completely. The real subject of a game is not its player but the game itself (Gadamer 1990: 112). In this sense he speaks of the *autonomy* of a game (Gadamer 1990: 116). Now, autonomy of a game means heteronomy for its players. It is not hard to see why: if someone plays a game she is supposed to play along the rules of the game, she is, as it were, sucked in by the playful reality unfolding itself and her actions are limited to what the rules of the game allow. For that reason Marshall McLuhan saw an important role for games in education: "A game is a machine that can get into action only if the players consent to become puppets for a time. For individualist Western man, much of his 'adjustment' to society has the character of a personal surrender to the collective demands. Our games help both to teach us this kind of adjustment and also to provide a release from it" (McLuhan 1994: 238).

The 'release' McLuhan talks about is an important reason why modern life cannot only be compared to a game, but should also be seen *play*. As I mentioned earlier, the phenomenon of playing can be approached from the game perspective, but can also be seen as a kind of free behaviour that purposely *transgresses* boundaries. Carse speaks

in this context of a game as *finite* play (ludus) and play as *infinite* or *free* play (paidea) (Carse 1997). Modern identity is formed and performed within this dialectics of play and game, just as we saw in the first three chapters where identity was regarded under the banner of autonomy and self-creation on the one, and heteronomy – identity determining social, cultural and biological forces – on the other hand. A variety of technological tools enable people to construct their lives with an increasing degree of freedom of time and choice, but simultaneously we get entangled ever more deeply in this web of technology dependence. Just as in a game the horizon of options to choose from is limited: I have to abide the law, there are certain minimal rules of proper conduct, my financial funds are not endless, I am dependent on many technologies for my survival, and so on. But there is still plenty of room for me to play with (and within) those constraints, to make my own choices and to lead my life as I wish. We live, by necessity, in a *technotopos* in which technology both liberates and constrains.

This paradox of freedom – the tension between autonomy and heteronomy – may even have become *the* characteristic, if not curse, of present-day society. It occurs on many levels. For example, there is a presumed freedom of choice in terms of lifestyles that in reality is based on a grinding absence of true autonomy. We may face endless options for life fulfillment, but simultaneously tremendous pressure is put upon us to *be ourselves*, to *enjoy*, to *make the most of life*. Modern human beings continuously feel the social whip striking their back, condemning every less successful life as a blatant failure. Be someone, or be a loser! As Anthony Giddens puts it somewhat less polemically: "In conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose. A lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfill utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity" (Giddens 1991: 81). Another example is provided by the relief progressing technology has given us over the ages, relief from burdensome work, allowing easy communication over great distance, the speeding up of activities, etcetera. Yet, the paradox revealing itself nowadays counters more speed with more congestion and more spare time with ever busier agendas. We created a world system that banks on the illusion of freedom; a system that only works as long as everyone plays the (e.g. financial) game along.

These ambivalences are part of play's nature. If we look a little bit deeper into the role of rules in a game and the way they function, we see them functioning in a twofolded manner. Games are spaces where organised play takes place. The rules of a game ensure that the game has an unpredictable and partly free course. Rules permit a certain *playroom* to exist, within which the trajectory of the game evolves freely. Rules foretell their own transgression by enabling something new, something unique every time the game is played. So, one of the moments of play is the moment where the player uses this 'playroom', where the player uses her creative freedom *within* the system so to speak. When playing, players play with the freedom offered by the game itself. The other moment of playing goes a step further and takes the player beyond the game. There playing is understood as *playing with* the rules, as flirting with the games' tolerated limits. Then play is the moment within a game where the player starts questioning its conditions. In doing so, a player places herself in a position where she virtually is *extra ludus*, a position from which she is able to break the rules. Then, a game becomes what I would call *playful*: it is the moment when reflexivity gets introduced within a certain setting, reflexivity that permits to look beyond the obvious. Identities form a perfect example of this mechanism: a person can play along the game of whom she ought to be for years, and live by a pre-given identity as one is supposed to, but only the moment she becomes self-conscious of her biases will she be able to move beyond them and play freely with her identity. In this case playful conduct can even turn into subversive behaviour, in which the existing circumstances are no longer taken for granted and an attempt to alter the rules of the game is conducted. In section 5.3 I shall say more about this type of playfulness by showing that weblogs are a powerful tool for this kind of civic 'disobedience'.

4.3 The ambivalences of playing

As the description in section 4.1.1 indicates, when we are playing we always hover along the edge: sometimes we are in and sometimes we are out of play; we can be posessed by it and fully immersed, yet simultaneously we have an awareness of its limited relevance somewhere in the back of our minds; we play by the rules but do not

forget about the 'normal' rules of proper conduct. Whenever we enter a play-world we engage in a world of ambivalences: a world where meanings shift and people alter behaviour and appearance. On the one hand, play is a phenomenon like all others: it is a fact that the activity of playing exists, it needs tactile parts and bodies in order to be performed, it is out there, as a reality. But on the other hand, it also represents a sort of hole in normal reality. We may even call it an 'ontological gap', because of the deviant perception of space and time by its players and its self-created universe of meaning. Play forms a world apart, a world different from ordinary reality in many respects. To play requires a change of perspective, a different take on reality by everybody involved.

In this sense play is at the same time real and virtual. It exists beyond any doubt, it is made out of pieces of hardware just as any other reality is (including ourselves – the players), but simultaneously it creates another reality: it causes effects to emerge from that hardware that were not there outside the play-world. For example, the tools we use when playing bear a completely different meaning than they would under normal circumstances. Seen from the perspective of the outsider play leaves the impression of being a world of appearances, a world that is not for real and which has only temporary relevance. But turn the perspective around and take the player's point of view, then the outside-world, the 'normal world', temporarily loses its importance. What is more, although it may be 'just' a world of appearance, playing causes very real effects on players, as anyone who has ever vigorously played a game knows.

This very peculiar quality of play, of simultaneously being a part of reality and of standing outside it, is called 'ontological ambivalence' by Ingeborg Heidemann in her monumental work *Der Begriff des Spieles (The concept of play)*. This ontological ambivalence is not only a consequence of play's nature, but also refers to the varying ways in which play manifests itself phenomenologically in the minds of players, engaged spectators and third parties like scientists. Each of them 'sees' play differently, might even see or experience another reality. To give an example: the way a game of tennis appears to the players – take the speed of time passing when they are *in the zone* – is by no means comparable to how a pampered VIP in a skybox witnesses the game. Phenomenologically, they are not in the same world. Play seems to oscillate continuously between the realms of being and appearance, seriousness and playfulness, inside and outside reality. Heidemann mentions in this context the *betweenness* of play

(Heidemann 1968: 10). In the remainder of this section I will expose the ambivalent nature of play in more detail on the basis of two of its most important constituents.[78]

4.3.1 Two ambivalences: space and time

The first constituent of play is its *spatiality*. Every play evolves in three-dimensional space and follows the physical laws governing this space. In this sense 'normal' space is constitutive of every type of play. The difference between normal space and play space – and thus its ambivalence – comes to the fore as soon as we take the player's experience into consideration. The act of playing is performed not only in normal physical space, but it also creates is own abstract, symbolical space. Space not only constitutes play, but play also constitutes its own space. Let us take the art of playing the piano as an example of how play creates its own space. A piano is played by a pianist, whose body is seated on a bench in front of the piano, say a Steinway concert grand of about 2,4 meters long and 1,4 meters wide. All of them neatly within their supposed measurements and obeying the laws of physics. Even the transferring of sounds to the listener, sharing those same spatial dimensions, can be perfectly explained scientifically. But precisely *what* these people sitting in the auditorium are hearing – music – can by no means be explained according to the principles of 'normal', Euclidian space. Music creates a spatial dimension that knows its own parameters: its variables being not length, width and volume, but harmony, structure, melody and meaning. The music played raises a reality in the consciousness of performer and audience, which is irreducible to its quantifyable, external, physical properties. Every play has its own, immanent logic, in this case a logic of musical mystery. Here we clearly witness an example of play's ambivalence, by means of a reality that, although it is made up of limited, 'normal' space, in itself creates and contains an unlimited, musical space.

[78] Maybe a quick reminder could be useful here: I purposely speak of the *ambivalences* of play and not of the *ambiguities* of play. Although play can easily be surrounded by ambiguities, for instance, in case of lacking rules or vagaries concerning what elements belong to a game – "is this part of the game or not?" –, here, the concept of ambivalence has been chosen in order to indicate the fact that all play is *two-sided*, that one can always look at it from two sides, as it is the case with paradoxes.

A second ambivalent feature of play is its *temporality*. Again, when a game takes place, it can be perfectly described in terms of clock time, having a beginning in time and lasting for so and so many hours, minutes and seconds. But for the player this is not the only way time passes. During playtime time accelerates and slows down, freezes or rushes by, can become highly concentrated or stretched out to almost infinity. As any player of games would know, it can cause the experience of completely forgetting about time, of being involved in a game to such a degree as to forget about all outer events. Some of us experience this when reading an exciting novel; others when engrossed in a game of soccer. One could describe this phenomenon with the concept of *branched* time: next to normal clock-time – which obviously still runs along – there is a parallel temporal universe, run by some intra-ludic logic. This playing-time does not necessarily coincide with the time played.

In a certain way one could speak of the annihilation of time within time during play, of a certain *timelesness* of play. The time represented within a game does not equal the game's clock time. Take a stageplay or a movie as an example. Although it begins at, say, eight o'clock in the evening and finishes at eleven, what is represented within the play can be anything from three hours to three years or even more. The trick is that both players and audience are deliberately letting themselves to be fooled, so to speak, in order to fully experience play's contents. This goes for play activities ranging from novels and films to computer games. Yet, playtime in itself has the same characteristics as normal time does. Every moment has its past and future and, although time gets distorted and flashbacks may occur, playtime basically too has a linear order. Let us return to the example of the pianist. Every moment of the performance her attention can be seen as kind of two-edged sword, forcing the pianist to listen back to the sounds she just produced and tuning them to the notes yet to be played. The piece is played in a continuously shifting present, from which the pianist extends herself consciously into the past and future of play. In an interview the great Austrian maestro Alfred Brendel once declared that because of this necessity of simultaneously listening to past notes and thinking ahead every musician is characterized by a split personality.

Of course these two ambivalences are by far not the only ones inherent to playing. Many other examples of play's ambivalent nature can be given. For instance, when we play it is all about the act of playing: we derive our satisfaction from it, but this is coupled with the contradictory effort to win a game as quickly as possible. Or, in the

case of reading a book, one reads because of the pleasure of reading but the better the book the quicker one wants to finish it. The same goes for the rules of a game: for one they restrict the player in her possiblities, but at the same time they enable the game to exist in the first place and to have an unforseeable outcome.

I perform these analyses on the ambivalence of play because I would argue that this is precisely the reason why the concept of play is so apt for explaining modern identity, as I laid bare its very paradoxical nature in the previous chapter. Play is the embodiment of ambivalences. Michiel de Lange writes: "I believe the most valuable contribution of a theory of playful identities could be in capturing this view of identities as mobile, open-ended and wrought with paradoxes".[79] What in my opinion is the main ambivalence of play in terms of media use and identity construction – its playfulness – will be discussed in the subsequent section.

4.3.2 The playfulness of playing: it is just play

No matter how often you tell a sports player it is only a game she is performing, the tears flowing after defeat will not be any less. Chances are, however, that half an hour later the same player, after she took a shower and had something to eat, when she has her obligatory meeting with world press, says something like 'yes, its hard to lose, but after all it's only a game, there are more important things in life'. How strange is that? And this radical turn-around of mentality happens millions of times a day, be it among sports players, computer gamers or children playing in the street. How strange a reality we enter when playing, a reality that one moment means the world to us, and the next loses all its significance. Here we encounter what is probably the most striking *and* most familiar ambivalence of playing: the ambivalence towards it own value. Play is easily opposed to normal life as not being serious, as a means for briefly opting out (or in!), entering a state of mind where we are relieved from the strain and obligations that life puts us under. Yet, hardly any human undertaking is done with so much vigor and dedication, with so big a desire to succeed as playing. As Johan Huizinga observed in *Homo Ludens*, it is seriousness that stands behind every game. "But let it be emphasised again that genuine and spontaneous play can also be profoundly serious.

[79] Michiel de Lange, *Moving Circles*, 2010. Unpublished PhD thesis.

The player can abandon himself body and soul to the game, and the consciousness of its being 'merely' a game can be thrust into the background" (Huizinga 1950: 20-21). This state of mind resembles what Gadamer had in mind when he talked about the work of art. Gadamer even claims that only seriousness (while playing) turns play really into play (Gadamer 1990: 108).

The paradox is that when a person engages in play, she does not necessarily have to show playful behaviour; just look at the world of professional sports for an example. Although players know it is only a game they are playing, this knowledge does not dilute their dedication in any way. Either one plays, or one does not. There is no middle ground between play world and the world outside. A person will always be oscillating between the two of them: she is in, or she is out. It is impossible to win a game *a little bit*. The thrill and joy that accompany playing are largely due to complete immersion in the game and the temporary forgetting of outer reality. Maybe it is because of the pureness of play, the fact that there is nothing 'really' at stake, that is, nothing but the honour and aptitude of the player – the *art of play* so to speak – why playing seems to involve this element of sacred seriousness. But even if we are fully immersed in what we do, it is still only play.[80]

Yet, this is just one way of looking at the ambivalence of playfulness and seriousness in play. In addition, the millennia-old art form of the *tragedy* demonstrates how play also has been a way of dealing with hardship. The delicate mixture of seriousness and weighty matters, humour and cheerful performance, transforms hard nuts into psychologically and morally edible ones. A playful mentality enables us to treat things as it were from a distance: to dive into them without being swallowed. Science is such a kind of serious play: we engage in it vigorously, aggrevating matters to the most, yet we are fully aware of its limited reach and we see our papers flushed down the gully of mass interest time after time again without leaving any noticable trace. It may well be that in the age of continuous news feeds all of us *need to have* a playful stance towards things in order to keep afloat: if we were to take seriously every bit of information that reaches us about the condition of the planet and human suffering, life would become

[80] What I write here about *flow* and *immersion* holds true for the player's consciousmess during play. If we look at the practice of play altogether, then a picture emerges, which is a lot more colourful instead of the black and white picture of simply being *in* or being *out* of the game. For example, in the case of professional sports huge commercial interests are at stake, which can lead to the kind of strategic behaviour that is not related to the act of playing in itself. A football match is played not only for sport's sake, but also to ensure the club's income.

unbearable. Cool eyes are sometimes needed to keep the motor of civilization hot and running. Section 2 of chapter 5 will see this type of playful behaviour as an important instrument in the battle against a hotter climate.

Apparently the relation between playfulness and seriousness can take on two forms: in the case of games we witness seriousness *within* play, their seriousness is an important means for the execution of the game. In not game-like settings on the other hand playfulness is performed as a way of dealing with the seriousness *behind* play. This is what is commonly understood by playfulness and it is this type of playfulness and play's ambivalence towards seriousness that is especially important to my thesis. If one looks up the adverb 'playful' in a dictionary, one reads of meanings along the line of 'full of fun', 'wanting to play', 'not serious', and 'light-hearted'. This interpretation of playfulness offers us a criterion to tell apart play from 'normal' reality. At the beginning of this chapter we set out on this journey by posing the question after play. What turns play into play and what sets it apart from other reality? We are now in a position to state that play's distinctive mark – its *identity* – resides in its playfulness. Playfulness is what both games and all other conduct we call play have in common. Playfulness is *the* criterion of play. Playfulness means there is always a high degree of ambivalence involved in such action we call play, since it means looking at things with double glasses on: for one it is only play and people recognise it as such, but somehow there is always an element of seriousness involved, either within or standing behind playful conduct. Playfulness is the expression of the ambivalence between seriousness and non-seriousness that is constitutive of all playing.

This also explains why the label of 'play' is being used as widely as it is, covering so many types of actions, even animal behaviour. We can doubt whether we can attribute the type of highly sophisticated behaviour that is required when playing a game – involving a concept of what is real, of rules, of planning ahead, of roles, of performance-levels – to a creature that even lacks language. Yet, even an animal seems to have some sort of intuitive 'knowledge' of merely being at play, which is why playing puppies do not really bite their brothers and sisters, and why kittens pull back their raiser sharp claws just in time to avoid injury. They somehow 'know' the situation is not serious, although they lack a well-articulated concept of play. Here as well, playfulness is the dividing line between play and normal, serious reality. As soon as we

stop pretending, stop doing 'as if', and we do not find ourselves any longer in a reality that is 'only play', then we clearly feel that normal reality has kicked in again.

Playful behaviour can be associated with a lot of qualities: it involves some minimal distance towards one's own actions in order to view them as mere play; one has to take a reflexive stance towards oneself, a kind of doubling of the ego – as I already elaborated on in chapter 1 in relation to self-identity – for being able to classify own's own behaviour as the kind of activity that has no consequences outside play, that is not for real. Playfulness means non-seriousness, it contains a touch of humour, of parody, of satire and it enables us to get away with saying 'it was only play'. Playfulness also means freedom, the freedom to toy around, to transform, to experiment, to open up new possibilities, to express critique in a harmless manner and resist the prevailing forces without immediately suffering severe consequences. Playfulness means frivolity, fun, and enjoyment of what one is doing.

4.4 Playful media

As will be shown in the upcoming chapters, the playfulness of modern, online identity resides in three ambivalences characteristic of play. The websites I describe and analyse throughout the last three chapters will all deal with these ambivalences. The ambivalences will be coupled with the aforementioned identity paradoxes. Let me now briefly introduce each of them by repeating what I already wrote about them in the *Prelude*, for the reader to keep a clear picture of the overall structure of this thesis.

The first ambivalence is the tension caused by the freedom of play(ers) on the one hand, and the heteronomy and rule-bound character of game-like situations on the other. In chapters 5 and 6 I show, through an analysis of political sites and green blogs, how the playful presentation of statements, jokes, humour and satire serve as a medium for expressing critical and subversive messages and facilitate resistance against (social, economic and political) systems. I shall describe so-called *green blogs* at length, which provide an apt example of how all the mentioned aspects of playfulness merge in an online environment. As well the aspects of play as freedom, as those of frivolity,

open(minded)ness and counter-culture are prominent features of these kind of websites. In this particular case we will witness a *playing with rules*.[81]

The second ambivalence concerns how we *play with others*, which I encounter in the playfulness of social network sites, consisting of a peculiar mix of individuality and collectivity. Therefore, in section 6.2 I pay attention to how playful, light, frivolous self-presentation of persons in online network environments is accompanied by the utter seriousness of social bonding and the pressure to develop distinguishing personalities.

The third ambivalence directly refers to the one I discussed along Heidemann's text: the ambivalence of play as creating a world of appearance, a kind of second, experimental reality as opposed to 'normal' reality. In other words: *playing with reality*. In this case there is a direct connection between online behaviour and personal identity. In online environments we witness playful probing of identities and the discovery of alternative stances and new ideas, but all this has very grave, real consequences. A playful environment encourages us to do 'as if', to take on roles beyond the ordinary. This role-playing can become so strong an experience as to forget what the 'real' world is or as to import characteristics into it. The gap between reality and appearance closes. In section 3 of chapter 6 I consider the implications for human identity of online identity experiments and the possibility for people to 'play with themselves'. As opposed to narrative identities, playfulness emphasises the openness and multilineair character of identity, just as a game virtually has an endless amount of possible variants and outcomes. Just as the way games are played over and over again, human identities remain under construction during the course of a life. And just like life, games have a high degree of uncertainty (about the outcome) attached to it: their course cannot be pre-determined. As I wrote in the first section of this chapter, play always contains an element of make-believe: it is accompanied by an awareness of a second reality against real life. By playing we engage in our 'second lives': we shift between the worlds of being and appearance.

[81] Players may sometimes be able to play *with* rules; generally they play *by* the rules. I use the concept of 'playfulness' on purpose because it expresses this ambivalence between game features and performative play features.

Chapter 5

Setting the playing field – *Green Blogs*

> We come to ourselves differently as we catch sight of our images in the mirror of the machine
>
> *Sherry Turkle*

If one ponders on how using the web might affect personal identity – by which I mean people's self-understanding – then it is not difficult to come up with a range of possible influences. The web is often said to offer people a platform to experiment with their identities, to explore who they are, or even pretend being someone else for a while to acquire better self-understanding. Applications such as virtual worlds, social network sites or homepages provide some of the tools to do so. Next to positive identifications – I am *this* or I am *that* – the web offers endless contrasting views: users encounter examples of identities they clearly disagree with. As explained earlier, negative identification contributes to the shaping of an identity as much as positive identification does. This chapter opens with an overview of the ways the web is thought to influence both the process of identity formation and its content. After those introductory remarks, I will move on to presenting my central case, an analysis of *green blogs*, from which I extract elements of playfulness in the sections thereafter.

5.1 Identity & the web

A big change that came with using the web as a medium for communication, information and self-expression, is that it greatly increased the amount of *feedback* and

comments one gets on expressions of identity. Web applications go along with the process of the growing reflexive dimension of personal identity as I showed it to be a prime characteristic of the (late) modern age in section 3.3. By adding advanced applications to the already extensive palette of tools for self-expression and communication, the web provides its users with countless incentives to reflect on their identities. After all, maintaining a weblog or personal homepage simply forces you to think about who you are and which aspects of yourself you want to show on the web. Equally important, it exposes your (alleged) self-conception to the critique of visitors of your site or blog. As such, the web can easily serve as a virtual mirror (for example, by means of chatting, reactions on blogs, comments on social netwotk site postings, or conversation in MUDs) and thereby unveil aspects of the identities of producers of homepages and blogs they were hitherto unaware of.

But even without the responses of others, the mere fact of working on a personal profile greatly boosts reflection on one's identity. Expressing oneself on the web urges people to develop a well worked-out understanding of who they are and invites them to pose questions such as 'Who am I?', 'Which photos do I publish?', 'What information can I put into my profile and what not?'. Research has shown that young people engaging in social network sites are "predominantly busy managing their identity: who am I, whom can I be, how do I come across. What do others think of me and how can I adapt to their opinions?"(Est, Van 't Hof & De Haan 2006: 180).[82]

In chapter 2 I explained the social nature of personal identities and showed how not only other people, but also culturally mediated symbols and practices reflexively have a bearing on the construction of identities. Often the person in matter is unaware of these cultural biases and social mechanisms steering the construction process. Now, the world wide web offers a gamut of ways to influence users' behaviour and the reflexive process of identity construction. Many e-companies – of which book and music stores are a famous example– use intelligent software in order to be able to 'suggest' purchases to their customers, by keeping record of past purchases or comparing one's preferences to those of other customers. In this manner, the site's visitor is unwittingly pushed towards a certain preference and will either identify or not identify with the suggestions shown, in any case, though, she is forced to reflect upon her consumption and behavioural pattern. The same goes, for example, for the widespread practice of

[82] Author's translation.

posting reviews about products on dedicated websites. Imagine you very much like going to a certain restaurant in your hometown, which turns out to be reviewed very negatively on dinner sites. Would you not start questioning your sense of taste? Would you dine there just as enthousiastically again after having read the reviews?

These days, the web offers thousands of sites that put visitors in a position to gather all sorts of medical and psychological information and to engage in personality tests that measure, for instance, how likely they are to fall prey to depressions or other sorts of mental illnesses. Just like that, websites dealing with the illness *anorexia nervosa* have recently been put under severe censorship. If one *googles* the subject it has become nearly impossible to find any other than medical sites that strongly warn against its health risks and that show shocking pictures of the devastating effects this illness can have on the human body. The reasons for such dramatic measures are obvious: fan communities talked more and more young women into a life-threatening diet. Supplemented by thousands of images of nearly perfect female bodies that hit our retinas through various media channels day after day, the psychological pressure on a lot of girls to live up to those photoshopped role models became just too high. This logic of the impact of media on our self-images can easily be extrapolated to sites about all sorts of bodily illnesses, but also to fan communities, political sites or network sites and the pressure they put on users.

These examples provide us with some evidence of how the web is not a simple, one-way tool we may use to our likings without running the risk of any backfiring, but that the web is – just as any other medium by the way – mutually shaped by users on the one, and by commercial and technological parties on the other hand. That is, we do build the web and its content and decide on what we publish or not; but the web also reflexively influences the quality of our lives, the things we desire, how we deal with it, they way we work, communicate, consume and make plans, what we expect of each other, in short: our way of life. In his book *Society & personality* Shibutani quotes a research on the impact (mediated) opinions have on people: “When Coates and Pellegrini interviewed 50 top executives and 50 first line supervisors in a variety of bureaucratic organisations, they found that most of the exectives conceived of themselves in the manner in which their category is popularly characterized. They described themselves as having drive and a strong desire for achievement, a sympathetic view of authority, decisiveness, the ability to organise, and a realistic

orientation" (Shibutani 2006: 242). The web reinforces this process by which people tend to place themselves in existing categories and use the way in which such a category is commonly portrayed as a point of reference for self-understanding.

Not only is there an exponential growth in the means for people to express themselves and to receive feedback on their expressions; the *speed* of communication skyrocketed also. In contrast to 'slower' media, such as print or appearance on television, the web allows (and calls) for immediate response to our blog entries, photos, movie clips and other postings. What mostly characterizes the current web – next to its social network features and its potential for personalization and user-generated content – is probably its *immediacy*, the quality of providing its users a platform for 'always being on'. Next to the constant updates users receive from their software providers, they are fanatically being kept up-to-date on the lives of their friends and relatives via applications such as Facebook and Twitter. On Facebook, for example, friends are informed immediately about changes in your profile and they can monitor entries and disussion on your wall. Each of your friends knows where you are and what you are doing. From this culture of 'being logged in' we can draw the conclusion, that in the web era connectedness precedes selfness. Identity has become even more relational than it already had been before the introduction of the world wide web.

As far as the construction of identities is concerned, another important difference of the web in regard to pre-internet media lies in the space presented for *experimenting* with identities. It is often heard that on the web one can be who ever one wants (after all, "on the internet no one knows you're a dog"). Social science research buttresses the idea that the self-exploration motive (discovering who they are) is the most important one for adolescent users to deliberately present themselves differently than they are on the web (Valkenburg, Schouten & Peter 2006: 51). In doing so, they are able to test identities and monitor their peers' reactions.

In addition, an important barrier for open communication is taken away on the web, as users, because of the smaller amount of audiovisual information people have to reveal about themselves (think of chatting) when communicating via the web, might feel less inhibited to expose certain intimite aspects of themselves. A process sometimes explained as the 'stranger-on-the-train' phenomenon, meaning that people are inclined to disclose intimite information about themselves to a stranger they happen to sit next

to in a train or an airplane rather than to their close ones (Cf. Valkenburg, Schouten & Peter 2006: 48). In case of the web this logic applies *a fortiori*: conversations via *messenger* are valued by asolescents as 'more entertaining, more intimate, more open and more agreable' than face-to-face conversations (Ibidem: 35). It gives a safe feeling of an environment that allows them to show who (they think) they really are. In a scientific experiment in which two persons were placed in the same room, back to back, looking at each other via screens solely, it turned out that this absence of unmediated visual contact was enough to make the subjects feel less inhibited and consequently expose more of themselves to each other in comparison to the situation in which they were able to see the other directly.

On the level of the *content* of identities, most striking about the web's impact is that it confronts users with an endless stream of opinions and ideas. Of course, older media such as television and radio also provided an opportunity to get into touch with new information, but the amount of knowledge, ideas, opinions and lifestyles on offer on the web can by no means by compared to what we take in via other media channels.[83] Dan Gillmor writes: "The Internet is the most important medium since the printing press. It subsumes all that has come before and is, in the most fundamental way, transformative" (Gillmor 2004: 236). On the web we are able to look for information globally, pro-actively, for free and any time we want. Because of the structure of the web as a collage of sites that refer to one and another by hyperlinks, we are just a mouseclick away from retrieving information that would have stayed hidden to us without the use of the web. Blogs are so fast in gathering and publishing information nowadays that they no longer get their intell from traditional media channels or the big media companies, instead, it is the other way around: blogs are places where a lot of news is first made (public).[84]

By implication, this growing supply of information and the ease and frequency of encountering other people and their customs and ideas via websites, opens up a range of perspectives to the individual user, which she will have to take into account in her

[83] NB. Google derived its name from a *Googol*, which is the name of a 1 with 100 zeros, meant to signify the endeavour of organizing the incredible amount of information in the world (Cf. Lehmann ea. 2005: 191).

[84] As goes without saying, this euphoric view on the benefits of the web is no exception to the rule and can be disputed too. For example, in *The saturated self* Kenneth Gergen warns his readers for the dark side of this (potential) information overload, by pointing at the looming psychological conditions of fragmentation and social saturation (See: Gergen 1991: 48-81).

own web-related behaviour and expressions. On forming an opinion on the political situation in Korea, Thailand or Iran, for instance, it makes a great difference whether the vested news channels are the only source of information, or whether the indigenous population send out their first-hand experiences and opinions to the world via blogs and Twitter. In this sense, the web truly is a forum where a 'clash of opinions' can take place. Some research has shown that users not only discuss their identities and engage in debates; they effectively use the web to develop new identities: "Outside the realm of influence of the elder generation and stimulated by digital information, young persons from immigrant families discuss the meaning of their islamic identity. Apart from their religious identity, they also redefine their gender and cutural idenity" (De Haan & Van den Broek 2006: 103).[85]

On the other hand, though, the web can just as easily put a pair of blinkers on users' heads. It is no secret that the surf behaviour of most web users is very conservative and that people visit a relatively small and stable number of sites. In reaction to this fragmentation of identities and the many impressions that reach them via the web, this very same web gives people a chance to reinforce their local identities and express and discus them on social network sites or forums. As such, the web serves much more as a bonding medium, as a medium to find the like-minded and create a comfort zone, than serving as a bridging medium that continuously challenges one's identity.

Having said all this, let us have a look how blogs actually change our world.

5.2 Green blogs : the bearable lightness of playing

Be realistic, demand the impossible.

Antonio Gramsci

On the Dutch environmental weblog *new-energy.tv* one of the most striking movie clips is of an impersonation of former US President George W. Bush addressing the nation on the subject of climate change. While stumbling through his speech, Bush hilariously fails to explain the phenomenon of climate change to the viewers. 'Condee' Rice plays

[85] Author's translation.

frisbee in the background, and Bush's primary concern turns out to be avoiding to show up late for the start of the Rangers' baseball game.[86] The short clip is a perfect example of serious issues meeting political satire, of a humorous way of bringing weighty matters to the public's attention and exercising political criticism at the same time. This clip is, as we all know, no unique phenomenon: around the globe growing environmental awareness and the daily nascence of new initiatives on how to secure our common future can be witnessed. They range from movies made by former vice-presidents and large music festivals on *World Climate Day* to people deciding to upgrade their neighbourhood with solar cells. A cooler climate is a hot topic. Going by numbers, in particular so-called *green blogs* or *eco-blogs* seem remarkably successful in getting through to a big audience and in bringing alternative ways of living and new technologies to the attention of the public. Individuals from all over the planet are joining in their efforts towards creating a sustainable society and gather on sites such as *Gristmill*, *Worldchanging*, *Treehugger, Sustainablog and Greenmap.*[87]

These developments prompt us to investigate the role of the web in this burgeoning 'green revolution'. Why are those weblogs so appealing? Can we really expect them to make a difference? Are these networks merely benefiting from a general mentality-turnover or might there be a medium-specific explanation for the impressive increase of green blogs and the number of their readers?[88] Is there a proper way to reflect on this cyber-surge of environmental concern philosophically? I believe there is. I will take French philosopher and psychiatrist Felix Guattari's visionary theory of the *Three Ecologies*, published in 1990, as a starting point in answering these questions. Guattari's work will serve as a theoretical background for analyzing how the web is currently used by the 'green-minded'. However, since it was written well before the real breakthrough and mass-proliferation of the world wide web, Guattari's version needs some drastic updating. After expounding his theory, I shall therefore move beyond Guattari in an attempt to 'rejuvenate' his ideas and render them fit for today's (cyber)reality. I do so by introducing the notion of *playfulness* as a contemporaneous way of online, subversive action.

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[86]Visited:http://www.new-energy.tv/categorie.php/8/145/opwarming_bush_spreekt_natie_toe.html?trailer=145

[87] To underpin these claims: *Treehugger* receives 35 posts per day, has more than 64.000 persons on their mailing list, and already had more than 10 million pageviews (June '2010). *Worldchanging* has 800.000 views each month.

[88] Blog index Technorati lists more than 500 blogs on the environment, tendency upward.

5.2.1 The *Three Ecologies 1.0*

First, let us consider the two concepts of *environmentalism* and *ecology* in order to establish what is at stake here. Manuel Castells explains the difference between the two of them as follows:

> By environmentalism I refer to all forms of collective behaviour that, in their discourse and in their practice, aim at correcting destructive forms of relationship between human action and its natural environment, […] By ecology I understand a set of beliefs, theories, and projects that consider humankind as a component of a broader ecosystem and wish to maintain the system's balance in a dynamic, evolutionary perspective. In my view, environmentalism is ecology in practice, and ecology is environmentalism in theory (Castells 2004: 170).

Ideally, one could say, weblogs serve both these ends: stimulating ecological awareness by offering educational content and, as a consequence, stimulating concrete action. Ecologists usually define their own discipline as the one dealing with living creatures in their relationship to both their biotic and a-biotic environments. The prefix 'eco' derives from the (ancient) Greek *oikos* ('home'), which tells that considering something ecologically, always means considering it within its 'housing', its environment, instead of as an isolated phenomenon. Take the human body as an example: the body is no self-sufficient container, but relies for its survival on the intake and excretion of air, fluids, energy. Our metabolisms are constantly gearing up to their environments in order to sustain a life-supporting equilibrium in terms of energy expenditure, heat and water management and anticipate and react to (possible) outer threats. Similarly, environmental ecologists comprehend natural phenomena as parts of relationships of mutual dependence. Since we generally fail to acknowledge this system of mutual dependence and fail to act accordingly, the environment (and ultimately man himself) has to pay the prize. As Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton write in their introduction to the *Three Ecologies*: "We have upset the delicate symbiosis between ourselves and nature, with largely unforeseeable results" (Pindar & Sutton in: Guattari 2000: 4).

This is Guattari's theoretical starting point. One of the causes of this upset, according to Guattari, lies in the fact that our understanding of what ecology entails has been too narrow – limited to the environmental sphere only. "Guattari's argument, and it is rather simple, is that we have an erroneous conception of ecology […] and that only by broadening our views to include the three ecologies will we be able to effect any enduring changes in our social/cultural/natural environment".[89] These three fundamental types of ecology are *environmental* ecology, *social* ecology and *mental* ecology. Environmental ecology studies humans in their interaction with the environment. Social ecology refers to humans and their relationships towards each other. Mental ecology indicates the relationship a person has towards herself, her demands and desires. According to Guattari, these three types of ecological awareness together constitute human subjectivity. Human subjectivity in this respect is seen as the complex of ways in which humans are 'aware', which entails self-awareness, awareness of others and awareness of objects and the surrounding world.

What these ecologies have in common is that in a lot of respects they are technologically mediated. As far as mental ecology is concerned, our self-images are to a large degree imbued with meanings derived from media – TV, books or the web – and we express ourselves increasingly via websites such as blogs and homepages. And as Guattari observes himself, human desires are largely created by media. Furthermore, social ecology, too, is increasingly practised online as is shown by the rapid growth in social network sites' popularity. (Besides that, on top of all the social applications the web offers, telephones are still used most to communicate, and have been for almost a hundred years.) With regard to environmental ecology finally, one sees a strong tendency among politicians as well as entrepreneurs to put their money on more – smart and sustainable – technology, rather than on changing habits. They look for a cleaner future in the technical instead of in the ethical and mental realm.

Guattari calls the field in which those three branches of ecology merge *ecosophy*. Dealing with environmental matters 'ecosophically' means involving social, ethical and political arguments as well, instead of merely looking for solutions in the economic and technical realm. Compare it to the popular slogan of the three p's in ecology-studies: that of *people*, *planet* and *profit*. Guattari argues against the one-sided technical

[89] Wolf-Meyer, web article. See: http://reconstruction.eserver.org/BReviews/revEcologies.htm

approach, by rightly asserting that successful ecological changes depend on the factors of economic development (profit), environmental conservation (planet) and social justice (people). Ultimately, what Guattari hopes for are changes in the field of human subjectivity in its broadest sense: changes of lifestyle and identity. The 'ways of living' on this planet are under discussion (Guattari 2000: 28).

The big culprit causing a lot of ecosystems to slide down the ladder towards ecological disaster is what Guattari calls *Integrated World Capitalism* (IWC). His text evolves around a critique of capitalist society. Guattari particularly blames the development and expansion of world telecommunications, which contributed to shaping a new type of passive subjectivity, saturating the unconscious in conformity with global market forces. More precisely, facilitated by mass media IWC causes a kind of environmental numbness, making people live inside the dream of eternal economic growth and endless physical resources. Through advertising the mass media feed a constant expansion and transformation of wants, and one-sided emphasis on the economic interests of our society – just watch some random news show – cause a neglect of attention for the underlying processes of resource depletion, bio-spherical imbalances and social injustice that ultimately matter. What all the talk of growth, consumption and comfort makes us forget, is that resources are *not* endless. As Guattari remarks: "Ecology in my sense questions the whole of subjectivity and capitalistic power formations, whose sweeping progress cannot be guaranteed to continue as it has for the past decade" (Guattari 2000: 52). It has been calculated, for example, that in order to provide current world population with their means of subsistence were they to adopt Northern American standards, it would take at least two additional planets to provide them with all the necessary resources. This is evidently an unsustainable development.

How to avoid this looming catastrophe? As indicated above, in Guattari's view media played a crucial part in its genesis. Mass media and the culture of capitalism are inextricably linked to each other: "IWC's most potent weapon for achieving social control without violence is the mass media. […] The mass media is involved in the creation of demand […] Guattari's contention is that IWC is not only destroying the natural environment and eroding social relations, but is also engaged in a far more insidious and invisible 'penetration of people's attitudes, sensibility and minds'" (from: *Introduction* to *The Three Ecologies,* Guattari 2000). This explains why he calls

capitalism 'integrated': it pervades all aspects of life, indoctrinates people's minds and homogenizes human subjectivity. According to Guattari, post-industrial capitalism tends to move away from structures producing goods and services towards structures producing signs, syntax and subjectivity (Guattari 2000: 47).

In reaction to this shift within capitalism, what we really need is another paradigm shift, a change in mentalities, on top of merely erecting windmills and using bio-fuels. This is where the internet[90] comes into the equation. Guattari believes that the internet, as a post-(mass)-medium[91], holds potential for democratization and for restructuring human subjectivity. In his time he was familiar to *Minitel*, one of the primitive precursors of email, of which he already heralded its potential of the 'proliferation of spontaneous and co-ordinated groups'. He expects the situation of consumer passivity not to last indefinitely, because technological evolution will introduce new possibilities for interaction between the medium and its user, and between users themselves. He hopes the junction of the audiovisual, the telematic and the computer screen leads to a reactivation of a collective sensibility and intelligence (Cf. Guattari 2000: 61). Guattari's *post-medium* should transform consumer passivity into a non-slavish, critical use of media, and invite users to rethink their lifestyles, to be susceptible to the impact of their lives on the environment and change their behaviour for the better. "By what means, in the current climate of passivity, could we unleash a mass awakening, a new renaissance?" Guattari asks in *Remaking social practices* (1990). Three years later the *world wide web* went online. Let us see what it brought us.

5.2.2 Green blogging: from mass-medium to multi-medium

What does this post-medium look like and why is it suitable to 'restructure human subjectivity'? Rather than talking of *post*-media – after all it is still a medium – we tend to call the web a *multi*-medium. The shift from mass- to multi-medium occurred on two levels. On a technical level, 'multi' refers to the diverse range of media that are

[90] Since Guattari's days were well before the launch of the web, I speak of 'plain' internet in this section.
[91] Guattari literally calls it 'post-medium' in his text, obviously meaning a post-*mass*-medium. It remains a medium though; the prefix 'post' does not mean the new device has become something completely different. Compare it to the concept of *post*-modernism, which is used to describe a movement beyond modernism, yet carrying its premises firmly within.

combined into this one medium. The world wide web offers several, varying ways of presenting information, combining words (written or spoken text), images (still or moving, graphical or photographical), and sound (music, talk, background noise) (Cf. Kattenbelt 2007: 31).

More important in this case is the second connotation of the prefix 'multi', which refers to the *multi*tude of users of weblogs. Here the term 'multi-medium' is used to underline the inter-activity of websites and the contributions by users of the web in comparison to books or TV. Web 1.0 still was a follow-up of traditional one-way media: users were able so surf and use hyperlinks, but the content of websites still was relatively fixed and could not be altered by its readers. Web 2.0, on the other hand, introduced a radical new feature by enabling its users to 'co-shape' websites. As a consequence, modern websites have some features that were unheard of in the beginning days of the world wide web: lots of sites are highly dynamic and constantly changing, some sites are never the same when you visit them; many sites call for active participation by its users in a sense of creating profiles, leaving remarks or altering the website itself; sites invite their users to personalize them: passively by ways of keeping track of preferences, or actively by uploading clips, photos, personal information wallpapers, etcetera. In the age of web 2.0, broadcasting has become narrowcasting: rather than few producers of sending out media content to the masses by limited television or radio channels, web 2.0 turns anyone with access to the web into a potential content provider who can report on specific, idiosyncratic topics to a targeted audience.[92]

Guattari already set this agenda when he wrote: "An essential programmatic point for social ecology will be to encourage capitalist societies to make the transition from the mass-media era to a *post-media age*, in which the media will be reappropriated by a multitude of subject-groups capable of directing its resingularisation" (Guattari 2000:

[92] It has to be admitted though that ecologically oriented websites often work with a stable pool of professional authors. Also, this description will by many be seen as overly optimistic about the benefits of web 2.0. Recently authors such as Andrew Keen and Jaron Lanier put serious question marks over the cultural and mental progression made thanks to the development of web 2.0. The authors sense the danger of cultural regression, mental regeneration, excessive narcissism, amateurism, the shrinking of creative powers, and unintendend lock-ins of computerized systems (See: Keen 2007; Lanier 2010).
More so, the supposed openness of web 2.0 is under discussion as well; a dispute is growing around the question whether web 2.0 is liberating or restraining. In 6.1 I will dig into this paradox further. See also: http://www.gamespace.nl/content/Wikinomics_and_its_discontents_2009.pdf

61).[93] For environmental practices this means that now, from all over the globe, people gather online in their struggle for a cleaner environment. In her article on environmental blogs, Kutner points out that in the pre-internet age 'citizen activist groups' had to make their case using very limited media channels such as newspapers or an occasional radio show. Now on the other hand, "for activist organisations with limited resources, internet-based technologies are providing fast, easy, and cost-effective means through which to access, use, create, and disseminate information. […] The decentralized nature of the internet lends itself particularly well to grassroots activism. Disenfranchised segments of society who are fighting against environmental injustices in their communities no longer need to deal with intermediaries in the form of the mainstream mass media and established publishing routes"[94]. Although Kutner still uses the generic term 'internet', this last observation perfectly describes current internet-based applications reaped together under the header *web 2.0*. Web 2.0 offers users a platform to create and disperse content, instead of merely retrieving information from the net.

A fitting example of such a web-practice is given by the lifestyle blog *Treehugger*. Although this blog is made by experts, it is dedicated to 'driving sustainability mainstream' aiming at 'discovering how to maintain your quality of life while reducing your harmful impact on the earth.' Welcoming 3.500.000 unique visitors per month in 2010, the website informs its readers on a vast range of topics.[95] One encounters tips varying from re-usable toothbrushes to environmental-friendly chopsticks and sustainable fashion. The site contains a TV channel – *TreehuggerTV*, one can browse job advertisements, it has a user generated blog, and one can even get advice on 'how to green your sex life'.

This last example on greening your sex life shows that on green blogs news on the environment is brought with a trace of humour and irony. The art of presentation differs greatly from the one used in the past by environmentalists, such as fearsome television broadcastings or printed pamphlets by deep ecologists. I would argue, the touch of humour, of interactivity and the trendy styling are what render green blogs

[93] For clarification: a *subject group* to Guattari is a group of self-conscious, non-repressed people acting autonomously. By *resingularisation* he means the new way media are dealt with: as a tool of critical reflection instead of affirming and spreading the dominant ideology.
[94]Kutner:*Environmental activism and the Internet*. On:
http://egj.lib.uidaho.edu/index.php/egj/article/view/2774
[95] See: http://www.treehugger.com/about/

appealing to a large audience and explains part of their success. The founders of the environmental blog *Worldchanging* describe their site thus:

> Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this is a conversation, not a sermon. We encourage not just feedback, but active participation, and, yes, challenge. Got a great idea for a resource we've missed? Let us know – better yet, write your own recommendation and send it to us. Think we're off-base with a recommendation we've made? Let us know that, too, and what resource you think we should have covered instead. Changing the world is a team sport.[96]

The remark on changing the world as a team sport leads us to the concept of *playfulness* as alluded to in the introduction of this section. I assert that two features of playful conduct are particularly important in regard to blogging. The first concerns playing as a way of subversive, critical behaviour. The second concerns play's non-seriousness, play as a frivolous manner of raising environmental awareness. I consider both features below.

Play as subversive action

The first aspect of playing I want to highlight in relation to weblogs is its potential subversiveness. In *The ambiguity of play* Brian Sutton Smith links this feature of play to its frivolity: "But frivolity is not just the puritanic negative, it is also a term to be applied more to historic trickster figures and fools, who were once the central and carnivalesque persons who enacted playful protest against the orders of the ordained world" (Sutton Smith 2001: 11). Those fools put themselves on Youtube nowadays. Because postings on blogs often have a hint of irony and because we are prone to see them as 'only a game' they have so much subversive potential: humour still is the best way to exert criticism. One of the key features mentioned in literature on play is its 'distance' to ordinary life: because it stands apart from the normal order of things it is a perfect place to practice criticism from. German play-scholar Ingeborg Heidemann stresses that play is characterized by its quality of being isolated from normal life, of detachment (Heidemann 1968: 9). Play symbolizes an autonomous domain, a domain of free thinking. It is in this way that it has been used before by philosophers such as

[96] See: http://www.worldchanging.com/about/

Schiller and Nietzsche, who used the concept of play to point at human freedom and the capacity to rebel against established powers. By negating existing social reality playful resistance calls for the emergence of a better world. Schiller and Nietzsche thought of the arts when they wrote about play. This form of *playful* social resistance was encountered in for example stage plays, by means of the subject and the dialogues, or even in an abstract piece of music that tinkered with conventional harmonies, on which Adorno vested his revolutionary hopes in the twentieth century (or both as in Wagner's Operas).

Today, web technologies offer their users even more explicit ways of expressing critique. Within the 'play-room' offered by the technology, a weblog gives its users a set of tools that enable them to design their site according to their own wishes and upload self-chosen content.[97] Open Source Software goes a step further and puts technically proficient users in a position to suggest software modifications and possibly contribute to its amelioration, or even build software from scratch. It serves as another good example of the fusion of playfulness and constructiveness. The creative advantages web 2.0 offers compared to older media offer an extra impulse to users for generating their own content and participate actively in environmental debates. Blogs offer us a platform for critical reflection and the expression of potentially subversive opinions. By means of the web "technology has given us a communications toolkit that allows anyone to become a journalist at little cost and, in theory, with global reach. Nothing like this has ever been remotely possible before" (Gillmor 2004: XII). Another example of how web 2.0 helps promoting a green way of living is described by Michael Pollan in his prize-winning critique of the food industry *The omnivore's dilemma*. There he quotes an ecological, Christian farmer who heralds the benefits of the web: "The beauty of the internet is that it allows like-minded people to find their tribes, and then for the tribes to find their way to us […] It's never been easier for people to opt out" (Pollan 2007: 248).

The web is such a unique medium for the spread of subversive messages because of its speed, low cost, easy capacity for forwarding messages, freedom from gatekeepers, and unlimited capacity (Kutner). Blogs are truly *by the people* and make people feel

[97] In literature on *play* and *games*, the latter is often seen as a field of rule-guided, pre-arranged conduct, whereas 'playing' is used to point at rule-transgressing or rule-changing, free behaviour. (See for example Carse 1997.) 'Play-room' should therefore be grasped as a space for experiments in terms of make-up, content and self-presentation.

they are able to make a difference. As Dicum observes in a web-article on *green blogs*: "They (blogs, jt) put out information and opinions with the goal of generating discussion and providing the space for people to test their own ideas. […] Blogs provide a way for readers to examine environmental issues more completely and to form their own positions on the matters of the day".[98] Most recently since Barack Obama's election as President of the United States in 2008, Twitter became another powerful web-based communication tool in addition to blogs.

The lightness of playing

The second feature that distinguishes weblogs from traditional media is their enabling of a *light* dealing with matters that were formerly often seen as 'abstract', 'incomprehensive', or 'too big' for individuals. The phenomenon of blogging renders environmental matters more tangible and understandable to the public, improves the accessibility of information about them, broadens their dissemination and thereby fuels general environmental awareness. In this respect blogs gain educational value: blogging mobs become smart mobs. An excellent blog in the slightly more academic compartment of the web is *Worldchanging*.[99] Based in *eco-capital* Seattle, *Worldchanging* publishes articles from specialists world wide. It focuses on solutions instead of problems and has an emphasis on technological developments (think of biotechnology or nanotechnology). It contains sections on green living, green cities, green consumer technologies, green business. In 2006 their best articles were published in a hard-copy edition. But also the site *Gristmill*, the weblog belonging to *Grist* – an Award-winning, online environmental magazine – offers several educational elements: links to sites on global warming can be found, to political, scientific and business sites, always related to green issues.[100] Another section allows readers to ask for advice on environmental matters and every week a new podcast with the latest environmental news is broadcasted. Wikis and the genre of *serious games* provide for other examples of web applications that educate the public in a playful manner.

Whereas in the past the environmental movement was mainly a 'not in my backyard'-movement, paying attention to local matters, now global problems such as climate

[98] Dicum, *Green blogs – the green revolution moves online*, source: http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/g/a/2006/03/22/gree.DTL
[99] http://www.worldchanging.com/
[100] http://gristmill.grist.org/

change and energy suppliance are entering the domestic sphere. Take as an example short movie clips people post – like the one on Bush – presenting alarming issues in an often humouristic way, yet making no mistake about the future dangers we face. Blogs seem to close the gap between large, abstract problems of global proportions and people's daily lives. *Gristmill* is an apt example of such a site. The makers purposely try to present heavy and gloomy environmental news with a joke. As can be read: "Let's face it: reading environmental journalism too often feels like eating your vegetables boiled. With no butter. But at Grist, we believe that news about green issues and sustainable living doesn't have to be predictable, demoralizing, or dull. We butter the vegetables! And add salt! And strain metaphors!"[101] The site's lay-out resembles a kind of menu with a 'Main dish-section' containing their main articles, a daily-blog section with latest news, and a section with 'green' tips, recipes and tastes for your kitchen. For those visitors who care less about *haute cuisine*: in the 'Muckracker-section' they can dig up 'the dirt on environmental politics and policies'. Eco-weblog *Treehugger,* too, is a site designed for the purpose of down to earth, common use, addressing matters of everyday reality. Visitors are taught how to throw an eco-party instead of being told big stories on the perilous future of mankind. So, obviously, these websites have been set up very broad content-wise, user-friendly, and highly accessible to a range of potential readers. Green blogs combine playful web applications, such as games and humouristic clips, with serious applications such as political issue sites, calls for citizenship and educational and scientific content. Green blogs present the best of both worlds: they are clearly *playful* in their presentation and serious in their message.

5.2.3 The *Three Ecologies 2.0*

In his essay *Remaking Social Practices* Guattari puts the finger on the ecologically sore spot as he writes:

> Humanity seems to have lost its head, or more precisely, its head is no longer functioning with its body. How can we find a compass by which to reorient itself

[101] See: http://www.grist.org/about/

> within a modernity whose complexity overwhelms it? To think through this complexity, to renounce, in particular, the reductive approach of scientism when a questioning of its prejudices and short-term interests is required: such is the necessary perspective for entry into an era that I have qualified as 'post-media', as all great contemporary upheavals, positive or negative, are currently judged on the basis of information filtered through the mass-media industry, which retains only a description of events and never problematizes what is at stake, in its full amplitude. It is true that it is difficult to bring individuals out of themselves, to disengage themselves from their immediate preoccupations, in order to reflect on the present and the future of the world. They lack collective incitements to do so.

What is at stake is no thing less than our survival. The question is whether we succeed in 'recovering our heads'. Is Guattari right in vesting his hopes on this new *post-medium*? Is his proposed cybernetic cure the panacea for our cultural illnesses? We can raise some important questions about how realistic his proposal is. Guattari seems to leave unacknowledged the complexity of some things. For one, the danger of idealism lurks behind every corner of his plea. It is at best naive, or a sign of an underlying technological determinism to expect a 'mass-awakening' from a web-like medium. Exactly because of its tailoring, its customization, web 2.0 faces big difficulties in reaching the masses. Probably, the initial impetus will have to come from elsewhere, such as the – cinematic – movie on climate change by Al Gore. Apart from that, the cyber revolution introduced a new kind of social exclusion, by opening a digital divide between the rich and the poor who cannot afford the technology or who lack the right infrastructure to make it work. Von Baeyer notices in his book *Information* that the impact of the information age is not as universal as it may seem. Although to us in the affluent West information technology appears to dominate life, it is still largely irrelevant to a vast portion of the global population. Von Baeyer thinks the world wide web will not solve the problems of poverty when half the people in the world have yet to make or receive a phone call.[102] No more than self-guided automobiles will improve the standard of living of three billion people who survive on less then $2 per day, or robotic surgery heals the more than one and a half billion who lack access to clean

[102] This figure may be a third by now.

drinking water. These examples painfully show the "treacherous depth and width of the digital divide" (Von Baeyer 2003: 6).[103]

Moreover, Guattari puts mass media and the corrupting effect of capitalism on a par, although of course the web is no less commercial than television: marketing directors of the big firms 'penetrate minds' through websites just as well. Just think of Amazon's customized book offers, the sponsored links that pop up on Google, or the intrusion by tracking cookies for advertising purposes. Yet, what Guattari seems to overlook completely, is that capitalism did bring a lot of good things too: it led directly to the internet-driven information society with its freedom of speech, as it was envisioned by Guattari! Although his critique of environmental practices and social inequality may be in its place, capitalist society also managed to create prosperity – in some parts of the world at least – that was unseen before in history. Besides, mass media like television and radio informed, educated and entertained billions of people during the past century and created huge economic value.

Meanwhile, the new medium addressed here – blogs – is under fierce assault as well. As mentioned in section 5.2.2, Andrew Keen launched a head-on attack in his book *The cult of the amateur*, in which he laments today's 'amateur monkeys' who "can use their networked computers to publish everything from uninformed political commentary, to unseemly home videos, to embarrassingly amateurish music, to unreadable poems, reviews, essays, and novels" (Keen 2007: 3). Weblogs in particular corrupt popular opinion, and undermine our sense of what is true and false, real and imaginary (Ibidem). The danger Keen identifies is of our culture slipping away into what he calls the *cult of the amateur*, in which amateuristic news and knowledge making takes over from expertise, experience and talent. Although Keen may be said to depict an overly dramatic future for the media, his overall line of criticism is difficult to refute. The relative freedom of gatekeepers and censorship I heralded above, clearly does entail downsides too in terms of the quality offered. The fact that on average every second a

[103] There are lots of ways to interpret the digital divide next to the economic interpretation. People also lack access to the net because of, for example, deficient computer skills, censorship or because their generation 'missed the boat'. The various forms of the digital divide could be classified into three main types: 1) The *material* divide: the lack of access for economic reasons or for the lack of infrastructure. 2) The division of *skills*: even if computers and networks are available to people, it is still another thing to use them properly. For example, this deficiency can be observed among the elderly in rich, developed countries. 3) The division of *usages*: the web can be used for doing serious business, but also for watching Youtube all day long. It makes great difference in terms of educational value and economic revenue whether the web is being used for, say, commercial gains, gathering information, self-expression or for plain entertainment only.

new blog is created, certainly does not add to the web's veracity. In addition to that, the sites that rent or offer blogs for free are designed according to certain rules and presuppositions – they are 'scripted' to use a technical term and serve ends of for example software firms – and thereby curtail the creative freedom of their end users.

What we also have to keep in mind is that from an environmental perspective there are quite some downsides to ICTs themselves. The increase in 'virtual' mobility always has its physical counterpart, every book ordered on Amazon gets shipped somewhere. The ICT industry itself consumes vast quantities of fuel, materials and chemicals and causes loads of toxic waste. It has been calculated that one search on Google consumes as much energy as turning a low-energy light bulb on for an entire hour. Although it is veiled to end users, there is an intertwining of the old and the new economy: brute manufacturing of pieces and high-energetic mining of minerals are necessary to manufacture computer devices (Zehle 2006). Von Baeyer observes that the real cost of information technology has not been generally appreciated either. He quotes an assessment suggesting that the manufacture of a single 2 gram computer chip consumes thirty-six times its weight in chemicals, 800 times its weight in fuel, and 1600 times its weight in water. Nobody knows when this hidden cost will become prohibitive (Von Baeyer 2003: 7). Rising prices of crude materials on the world market due to increasing scarcity do not add to solving this problem. The irony of this all is that the poor who are not able to afford all this high-tech equipment are stuck with its very hazardous disposal: we happily ship our e-waste to Africa and Asia.

Green blogs: too light or heavy enough to save the planet?

Guattari *was* right in stating that rather than a technical, we are dealing with a mentality problem. Our ethics of mobility, for example, the definition of human freedom in terms of the ability to *move* freely, is one of the underlying causes of fossil fuel depletion and the explosion of CO2 concentrations in the atmosphere. Currently, ecological issues are still too often dealt with in a strictly economic way. The three ecologies boil down to *exploitation* of the environment; atomism, egocentrism and alienation in the social realm; and a consumer mentality of materialism and hedonism. Guattari calls this predicament an 'imperium of a global market that destroys specific value systems and puts on the same plane of equivalence: material assets, cultural assets, wildlife areas, etcetera.' (Guattari 2000: 29). Put otherwise: all values have become market values.

What is needed is no less than an *identity change*: a new way of looking at ourselves, our lifestyles, our relationships towards nature. What is needed, is a new way of doing business and using natural resources, one that places durability instead of profitability on top of the agenda, one that acknowledges that economic growth is not a law of nature. Guattari asserts: "An essential condition for succeeding in the promotion of a new planetary consciousness would thus reside in our collective capacity for the recreation of value systems that would escape the moral, psychological and social lamination of capitalist valorization, which is only centered on economic profit".[104]

In addition to Guattari, one might state that the problem with value systems is that they tend to become outdated rather quickly. Due to technological innovations, altering lifestyle patterns, demographical factors or environmental changes, values and derived norms are soon overtaken by the course of life. Take our moral (and political!) incapacity to deal with newly discovered methods in the field of medicinal genetics as an example. The ability to predict future diseases charges us with the burden of making far-reaching decisions on treatment or even on life and death, decisions that are difficult to make using current moral standards, because they were not devised for such a situation. The history of morality is one of a constant catch-up with reality. In relation to ecology, this causes us to live with values and customs that originated in an era of ecological darkness. Our (Western) values of freedom, growth and mobility developed during the course of centuries, finding their ultimate effectuation in modern, hypermobile, globalized society. Yet, scientific knowledge in those days was by no means comparable to what we know now on matters like pollution, resource depletion, biospherical balance, soil regeneration, climate change, and so on. The ideas and customs we live by largely stem from an age in which people naively viewed planet earth as an inexhaustible, self-regenerating source. It made people claim the right to randomly cut forests, pump up billions of barrels of oil from the ground and slaughter animals arbitrarily. Traditions, though, do not necessarily provide the best maxims of conduct. Since we are gaining more and more knowledge of ecosystems, of the impact of our behaviour on the environment, since sustainable technologies flush the market and since we are moving up to 8 billion inhabitants on this planet, there is an urgent

[104] Guattari in *Remaking social practices*, on:
http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-9710/msg00015.html

call for the updating of our morals. To every densely populated, complex society the inverted adage applies: *Erst die Moral, dann gibt's vielleicht Fressen*.[105]

Guattari recognises this need in an attempt to think beyond the concept of ecology in the old-fashioned, capitalistic sense. In doing so, he was influenced heavily by Gregory Bateson's idea – expressed in his book *Steps to an ecology of mind* – that the fundamental unit of survival in nature always is 'organism plus environment'. "The unit of survival is *organism plus environment*. We are learning by bitter experience that the organism which destroys its environment destroys itself" (Bateson 2000: 491). Bateson contends that our current, delicate ecological predicament is caused by unreflected technological progress, exponential growth of world population, and by wrong ideas and values on how to interact with nature. (As Bush remarks in the video I referred to in the beginning of the section: 'Why listen to nature? We have to make nature cooperate with us!')[106]

Following Bateson Guattari writes: "The notion of collective interest ought to be expanded to include companies that, in the short term, don't profit anyone, but in the long term are the conduits of a processual enrichment for the whole of humanity" (Guattari 2000: 65). Therefore, what is required above all - more than merely an *environmental* - is a new *mental* ecology, that is, a restructuring of desires and demands. This new 'mental ecology' will be pushed forward even more by the proliferation of environmentally friendly devices that help to change our behaviour unconsciously. Frequently, the top-down introduction of some new technology is what it takes to convince people of its benefits once it is in place. Think for example of speed ramps or speed limiters, which are usually welcomed with little enthousiasm, but gradually gain support as people start to witness safety increase. A little techno-determinism can sometimes do wonders in turning conservative minds around.

What this mental turn-around ultimately aims for is nothing less than a whole new perspective on the human being in its relationship to its life-supporting environment. Instead of being led by the pursuit of short-term gratification, Guattari tries to view the relationship between human beings and the planet they thrive on from an evolutionary perspective: a new mental horizon which he calls 'glacial time', in which short

[105] This is an inversion of Bertolt Brecht's famous line in his play *die Dreigroschenoper* "Erst kommt das Fressen, dann kommt die Moral" (first comes eating, afterwards comes morality, jt).
[106] See: http://www.new-energy.tv/categorie.php/8/145/opwarming_bush_spreekt_natie_toe.html?trailer=145

sightedness makes room for intergenerational solidarity. As Petra Kelly observed, this transformation boils down to an identity change:

> The Green approach to politics is a kind of celebration. We recognise that each of us is part of the world's problems, and we are also part of the solution. The dangers and potentials for healing are not just outside us. We begin to work exactly where we are. There is no need to wait until conditions become ideal. We can simplify our lives and live in ways that affirm ecological and human values. Better conditions will come because we have begun .. It can therefore be said that the primary goal of Green politics is an inner revolution, 'the greening of the self'.
> (Kelly, cited in Castells 2004: 168)

The question thus is, whether the web can contribute to such an 'inner revolution'? Guattari clearly thought so, but died too early to witness its blossoming. Guattari's essay turned out prophetic in a double sense: for one his vision of a *post-medium* became reality, and his concept of the *three ecologies* found general acceptance. It is hard to find an ecologist nowadays who denies ecology to consist of an environmental, economic (mental) and social dimension. On the web we find this threesome embodied in a perfect way on the site *Oneworld*.[107] It is a site that captures three problematic aspects of the current process of globalization: one can read about environmental issues, about cases of social inequity, but also browse their vast list of jobs in the field of humanitarian aid and environmental affairs.

Whether web 2.0 has the potential to boost a 'recreation of value systems' remains to be seen. Although blogs may seem initially uncensored and open to whatever entry, one should never underestimate the power of their moderators. In reality blogs are prone to the danger of becoming quasi-homepages of their founders, embellished by entries of others that happen to suit their vision. Green blogs are no exception to that. The numbers on bloggers I gave earlier equally do not tell the whole story. The profundity of reading is another matter. The fact that a website has 800.000 views per month says nothing about its impact on those viewers/readers. It is extremely difficult

[107] http://www.oneworld.nl

to establish a causal relationship between visiting green blogs and actual changes in terms of mentality and lifestyle, as Guattari was aiming for.

Other signs are more promising though. Big societal changes do not happen over night. What we in retrospect call revolutions – like the agricultural or the industrial revolution – really were protracted changes in the manner of producing food and goods, of labor division and administration that seeped through the layers of society during the course of decades or even centuries. The transition to a sustainable society will remain work in progress for centuries to come. Research has shown that the proximity of problems in people's perception is of big importance to their evaluation. Therefore, weblogs could play an important role in achieving general awareness-raising and contribute to the mental foundation that is needed for this transition to stand a chance in the first place. Especially environmental hazards creep into people's heads more easily when experienced on an interpersonal level than when they are brought to people by mass media (Cf. Nas 2000: 21). In the past media have shown the revolutionary potential and power to transform social institutions. The invention of the art of printing, for example, made the vast dissemination of dissident ideas possible without which the protestant revolution within the Christian church would have been highly unlikely or at least greatly postponed. Just like that, web 2.0 may have what it takes to reach a *tipping point* in regard to a global sense of ecological urgency.

Up until a couple of centuries ago, people lived on one planet. Now, globalization made us all part of one world. Together, we have to cope with some of the biggest challenges *Homo Ludens* ever faced. Even people in the most remote places on earth, who never heard of a phenomenon like climate change, who do not have access to electricity or a telephone, they all play their roles in the grandest and most hazardous, deliberate experiment human kind has undertaken so far: are we able to render our world-society fit for a sustainable future? It is a unique experiment: the number of people alive on the planet, the amount of resources they use, the almost unlimited power of their technologies to change their environment are unseen on the surface of the planet to this date. This situation leads us into an unknown future: no one knows the consequences of dispersing 70.000 tons of CO2 in the atmosphere day after day. By unleashing the ghost from the technological bottle, humankind has – unwittingly – devised the means to undermine its own existence. Environmental regression is like an assassin who comes up to his prey in stealth mode only to strike when it is too late for

adequate counter-measures. In fifty years from now, maybe, will we know the outcome of this Promethean experiment.

Fortunately, as Bush teaches us in the video clip on global warming, the solution to all our global, ecological problems is astonishingly simple: we just need to make nature cooperate with us, we do not need to listen to nature! Fortunately too, Bush returned to his ranch in 2009. If an American president may not have the powers to make a real difference, so we, the people, do. Green blogs show that a small step for one man – to buy green energy and separate his waste – can mean a giant leap for mankind towards a sustainable society.

5.3 Conclusion: playful weblogs

In the case about green blogs we see how these blogs are used in several *playful* ways. They are used as awareness tools, as a *not-so-serious*, accessible way of presenting information on ecological affairs, as a tool for playful resistance against vested orders and as a podium for painting an alternative world. As such we could call them 'glocal' phenomena: they provide us with a low-entry, friendly way of entering weighty, global issues into our living rooms. Dealing with one of the big issues of global politics – global warming and the sustainability of our lifestyles – moves into reach of ordinary citizens. Blogs translate global thinking into local action and contribute to the creation of sustainable ways of living. In this case, the popular adage really should go like: Think *and express yourself* global, act local. Green blogs form a perfect case of global commitment through personal touch and illustrate what Castells means when he says that the internet enables an instant relationship between the local and the global.[108]

Hence their influence on people's identities: in the case of weblogs we come across a global medium that is used by people considering themselves global citizens, who take part in a global movement of the environmentally-minded people, that has as its goal the globe and its preservation and is concerned with global eco-systems. Since global problems call for a global solution the web is the pre-eminent medium to handle these

[108] See 6.1.1

problems. In the future it may fulfill a much bigger role than it does now, by informing even more people about the hazards of our way of life and by offering sustainable alternatives. A hopeful example already in place that, one that clearly demonstrates the benefits of the web, is the cooperation of PCs all over the globe, instigated by the BBC, that serve as one giant supercomputer and calculate climate models.[109] The world wide web is used as a global brain in tackling this most dangerous of all global problems.

The other side of blogs, though, is that they too are part of an information and communication technologies industry that is highly commercial, pollutant and consumes vast amounts of energy. As is the case with anti-globalists who use global media and global means of transportation to fight globalization, here too the paradox applies that the critics are compelled to revert to the system they criticize in order to yield any effect. One can only play if one agrees to the game first. The globalization of trade, of media and lifestyles is the game that imposes rules upon us that we can bend only if we play the game along. At least for the moment. No revolution, no civil upheaval appears out of the blue, but is deeply anchored in the society it criticizes. This very mechanism of the power of structures over individual agents was painfully exposed to everyone of us during the last two years, as the global game of monopoly that our bankers were playing suddenly ran out of bank notes. As they were forced out of their homes, lost their jobs or were disappointed by ATM machines refusing to churn out cash, millions of people around the globe experienced the power of the financial game they were unwittingly part of and the impotence of single puppets on the global board.

For the moment, green bloggers act on the basis of what Manuel Castell calls a *resistance* identity. They are part of a growing, global army of citizens who have become aware of the unsustainability of our current economic system and who engage in activities that aim at designing a different, sustainable future. As their word spreads, already, we see this movement developing into a project identity, substituting a mere critique of capitalist ways of doing business with well thought-out ideas about green lifestyles and with actual, existing new technologies. Indeed, as Guattari rightly claimed, the creation of a sustainable society is first and foremost a matter of identity. The principle effort revolves around the creation of a new (self)consciousness towards

[109] The experiment was launched in 2007 and 250.000 households took part in it. The results of this experiment predict a temperature rise of 4 degrees Celsius in the UK by the year 2080.
See: http://www.bbc.co.uk/sn/hottopics/climatechange/

the ecosphere, towards morality, towards the way we do business, produce and consume, and towards the way we treat all the people involved in the process.

In what way do blogs contribute to this change of mentality? If we compare the current medialandscape – of the last 15 to 20 years – to the one of the decades therefore, then the world wide web offered a truly revolutionary potential to the people in terms of the potential for communication, the expression and spread of subversive views and the actual organisation of resistance, as compared to the ages of the media of print, analogous telephony, radio and television. Of course, analogous media played their part in the coming of revolutions too. In fact, no social movement can do without the *spreading of the word*. A by now classic example is the role television played in the information of the Eastern European countries at the time of the Iron Curtain. The fall of the Berlin Wall became the first real 'television revolution' as the citizens of the former GDR became aware of the living standards they lacked and the freedom that was enjoyed by West Germans. The actual toppling of the Communist regime was partly a consequence of widespread reception of West German television, as the citizens of East Germany learned about the revolutionary happenings in their country.

In comparison to those classical ICTs, though, the web offers its users far greater speed, flexibility and immediate, worldwide communication; it allows more influence on its development, it can leave authors anonymous, and because of its network character users are more difficult to trace. (Although not untraceable as the example of Chinese internet in section 6.1 will teach us!) The web is the ultimate refuge for the construction and expression of (resistance) identities. More so – and this is the quality that really sets the web apart from older media – web 2.0 applications are highly interactive and offer great fun to their users. In their article *New media – new pleasures*? Kerr and colleagues (Kerr et al. 2006: 63-4) note that in the academic discourse surrounding new media the concept of pleasure – in particular the pleasure of play and control – emerges with more frequency as theorists try to grapple with the uniqueness of new media. From different sources, including their own research, they distill five different types of pleasures offered by the use of new media, which are: control, immersion, performance, intertextuality and narrative. The overarching concept of play is posited as 'a key concept for understanding the interaction of users with new media' (Kerr et al. 2006: 69). Play is seen as the unique pleasure that is experienced when control, immersion and performance are combined (Ibidem: 69-70).

The pleasure of *play and control* has to be understood in the same fashion as I have so far: as being in control (play) or as being controlled (game). Drawing upon Salen and Zimmerman's work on play and games[110], Kerr and colleagues describe how affirmation and resistance are always inscribed in the process of playing (Ibidem: 67). Pleasure is said to be created by submitting to the rules, as well as by testing or resisting these rules. If the technical competence of the player allows to do so, play can even become transformative play – the pinnacle of interactivity – whereby the player actually tries to subvert the original rules and goals of a game (Cf. Kerr et al. 2006: 70).

The pleasures uniquely attached to new media arise precisely in this playful tension of immersion in an activity – following the rules of the game – and using the space for creativity that is offered by the technology. Interactivity in the digital age means that we are in a position to *play with the medium*, to personalize it to a high degree. This is a crucial difference with media like books, newspapers and television, which resist active audience participation and user-generated contributions to the form and content of mediatic expressions. As Kerr and colleagues contend, for this reason new media can be viewed upon as causing a pleasurable state of play among their users. Also, according to Kerr and colleagues, many new media theorists would now argue that narrative is often secondary to other pleasures in new media (Kerr et al. 2006: 68, 76). Instead, fluidity, flexibility, open spaces and explorative consumption are new models to describe the interaction with new media. Again, elements of playfulness.[111]

Following this line of reasoning, the appeal of green blogs can easily be detected. Blogs invite people to contribute: to post their reactions, remarks, ideas. Blogs' content is 'sticky'- to use a term by Malcolm Gladwell: it is easily accessible, contagious, fast, often funny, low-profile, multi-medial, entertaining. In addition to text, blogs consist of movie clips, pictures, sounds, music; they offer space for advertisements; they comment on lifestyle issues; one gets advise on saving money through energy reductions and green household applications. In short, the message they convey is that sustainability is fun; more importantly, that it is something you can do yourself! Weblogs create pleasure by involvement. This is a crucial aspect of web technology:

[110] Salen & Zimmerman, *Rules of play: game design fundamentals*, Cambridge, 2003.
[111] Some of the characteristics I attribute to blogs, can also be found in traditional media; TV, movies and comics, for example, can be very playful too. In section 7.1 I go into the unique qualities of web 2.0 in more detail.

activity and creativity - the idea of being part of it yourself; creating something rather than just consuming it.

Apart from blogs the strength of interactivity in creating environmental consciousness is used by other computer technologies, such as serious games. Serious games address, for instance, political or environmental issues that all aim at giving the player the impression of what it is like to manage a city, to save an endangered species, to deal with climate change or other burning problems.[112] The big difference with traditional media coverage of these issues is *experience*: these virtual worlds make the player experience herself what it is like to act like a city builder, to make important decisions, to take account of environmental damage, to know what is at stake. Games call for participation, for creativity and for active thinking about solutions, which is both very informing and rewarding.

The playfulness of green blogs and serious games creates a user-friendly environment with an easy entry to serious matters like the preservation of ecosystems. In general, playfulness – in the sense of humouristic presentations and a (seemingly) non-serious approach – often is the weapon applied on the web by people who want speak with a critical voice. A very entertaining example of these kind of sites is the news-site *the ONION*, which is one grand parody on politics, science and any other subject of public debate. By making fun of literally everything – for example by staging fictitious debates in videos – the makers succeed in pulling viewers' attention and triggering their critical awareness of what is in the news. Or take a look at *Humour Gazette*, which is a blog that practices full-on political satire: fierce assaults, but always presented with a lot of humour. In the Netherlands *Geenstijl.nl* is a very popular (and populistic) news blog that uses satire as a means of challenging the political and cultural establishment. *Apoplectic Press* is another site in this same genre, which "designs clothing and greeting cards for activists, liberals and counter-culture folk with an odd sense of humour".[113] Again, the site is designed in a very playful manner, and uses humour as a weapon against societal dissent. As such, the world wide web provides much more subtle and entertaining ways of expressing criticism and showing our discontent with politics and organisations. Thereby being very different from chaining ourselves to nuclear power plants or engaging in mass-demonstrations.

[112] Some examples of these are: Darfur is dying, SimCity, Baasopzuid.nl, Geography World, Food Force, EcoQuest.
[113] See: http://www.apoplecticpress.org/index.htm

The non-seriousness, humour, the doing 'as if', they are key to the *method* – so to speak – of playful use of online environments, they pave the way for the web in becoming a place to exert critique, share subversive opinions, but also a place for innovative ideas. In play a space is opened up for creative, participatory and interactive action. This feature of play has also been referred to as 'playroom' by some play-scholars: "Bettelheim has pointed to the fact that children, as well as adults, need "plenty of what in Germany is called *Spielraum*. Now *Spielraum* is not primarily 'a room to play in.' While the word also means that, its primary meaning is 'free scope, plenty of room' to move not only one's elbows but also one's mind, to experiment with things and ideas at one's leisure, or, to put it colloquially, to toy with ideas" (De Mul 2005: 263). As I already stated in the former chapter: playfulness means freedom, freedom to toy around, to experiment, to open up new possibilities, to exert critique in a harmless manner and resist the prevailing forces without immediately suffering severe consequences. Creativity implies playfulness as one has to dare think 'out of the box', to play with the rules, to transgress boundaries and open oneself up to new and different insights. In the case of green blogs: to envision alternative energy sources, new ways of producing our goods or a transformation of behaviour. We saw how a playful, humorous presentation of affairs, was coupled with a very serious and urgent message.

Chapter 6
Playing with paradoxes

In this chapter I conceptually deepen the analysis of playful web use. Building on the *green Blogs* case, I give additional examples of the three paradoxes of identity in the realm of the web, and I further explain the concept of playfulness. First, in section 6.1, I reflect on the tension between global forces impinging on individuals on the one, and local resistance practices and expressions of freedom on the other hand, as foreshadowed in the previous chapter in the concrete case about green blogs. The main development I aim to illuminate is the paradoxical process of a growing space for autonomous behaviour on the one, and the simultaneous spread of heteronomic forces in regard to the construction and experience of (in this case: collective) identities on the other side, such as commercialization and technological homogenization. The analysis presented here serves as a preparation for the overarching argument, stating that identities are becoming ever more *playful* in terms of the strengthening of the tension between powers of freedom and powers of force. As I seek to demonstrate on the grounds of Manuel Castells' work, *playfulness* is the key feature of web-based applications for those resisting the new global order, but it is also for those in search of new means for enjoying free, personal expression.

6.1 Playing with rules

In *The power of identity*, the second part of his information age trilogy, Manuel Castells advances the view that the process of techno-economic globalization that shapes our world is being challenged, and will eventually be transformed, from a multiplicity of sources, according to different cultures, histories, and geographies (Castells 2004: 3). As he says it outspokenly: "Where there is domination, there is

resistance to domination" (Castells 2004: xvii). Although he claims that global forces are reshaping states, ethnicity, ideology and gender over the world, the very same information and communication networks also further people's capacity to construct what he calls *resistance* or *project* identities (I will explain them below) by which they negate existing dominant political or cultural forces.

Obviously, Castells did not call his book *The power of identity* by accident: there is an inextricable bond between social movements and identity, even a *primacy of identity politics* in the network society (Cf. Castells 2004: 12). Social change grows from communal resistance that is somehow based in a sense of identity of a (repressed, neglected or dissatisfied) group of people, identity being the social glue between individuals, the common provider of meaning to their actions. A social movement, according to Castells, consists of "purposive collective actions whose outcome, in victory as in defeat, transforms the values and institutions of society" (Castells 2004: 3). The way in which this process of transformation of societies unfolds can be explained by three forms and origins of identity building.

First, starting point is what Castells calls a *legitimizing identity*: the identity introduced by the dominant institutions to extend and rationalize their domination. Those suffering this domination, might generate a *resistance identity*, which is a form of collective resistance against oppression, opposing the dominant institutions of society. Once those in resistance have succeeded in their actions a resistance identity can turn into a *project identity*, which is the expansion of a resistance identity towards the transformation of society. Instead of merely opposing the dominant ideology, it projects the building of a different life and new type of society. (Cf. Castells 2004: 8-10) This threefold sequence means that over time, what starts out as resistance identity can become a project identity from there on, and ultimately become the new legitimizing identity, that is, the new dominant cultural force. How does this work out in reality and what role does the web play in such instances of subversive action?

I want to demonstrate the importance of the web in this process of liberation and protest against the vested order by sketching two early forms of political resistance in which the web played a decisive role; both of them I draw from Castells' work. One of the social movements typically linked to the network society described by Castells, is the rebellion of the *Zapatistas* against the Mexican government (See: Castells 2004:

75-86)[114]. The Zapatistas – named after the Mexican anarchist *Zapata* – are a group of peasants, mainly native inhabitants, who fight for peasant and Indian rights, for the just allocation of land, and who oppose the neo-liberal course of their country in general. After Mexico joined NAFTA[115] in the beginning of the 1990s, the liberalization of the Mexican economy meant a huge blow to an already fragile peasant economy as price protections and import restrictions were abandoned, leading to the first – and only – violent uprising of the Zapatistas against Mexican armed forces in 1994.

The reason why the Zapatistas are very interesting to Castells is – firstly – that they do not only fight for their own land and their economic survival, but they collectively turn against the new world order in which capitalism, and its excesses, has become universally accepted. Secondly, according to Castells the success of the Zapatistas was largely due to their communication strategy. He even calls them the first *informational guerrilla movement*. Although there have been violent encounters, the Zapatistas' main objective was to use the media to communicate their message and find support, instead of going into a bloody guerrilla war. Castells calls the use of telecommunications, videos, and of computer-mediated communication essential in their strategy. The Zapatistas used these media to diffuse their message to the world, and to organise a worldwide network of solidarity groups. Especially extensive use of the internet[116] helped to produce a movement of international public opinion which made repressive and violent intervention in the conflict by the Mexican government impossible. The Zapatistas understood the power of information over weaponry: because of their internet-based alliances and media connections they were protected from repression and raised the issue of social exclusion and political corruption for a global audience. As a result, the Zapatistas' actions helped to bring about constitutional reforms on behalf of Indian rights, affirming their cultural identity and improving their living standards. To Castells, this history shows that the new global order leaves room for local disorder, that communication networks can be used to serve the vested powers, but also by those who resist them.

[114] I will not insert any further references in the next couple of paragraphs, for all I write here relies on Castells.
[115] North American Free Trade Agreement
[116] Since Castells continuously talks of the 'internet', I follow his idiom. The kind of use of the internet he describes, falls under the category of the world wide web.

The second example of social struggle in the network society I want to discuss in short is the *anti globalization* movement. It provides a particularly apt case of the paradoxical use of global communication networks by opponents of capitalist globalization in an attempt to undermine the economic, social and cultural forces that dominate world economy - and which therefore also dominate the communication networks they use - and who put forward an alternative economic order and plea for the democratization of global financial and economic institutions. In recent years large groups of protestors outside conference centers, closely watched by thousands of heavily armed forces, have become a common sight at meetings of the G20 or WTO-summits. In 1999 in Seattle protest was so fierce that the meeting of the WTO even had to be shut down. Although Castells admits that it is highly arguable whether we can speak of a social movement at all in this case, because of the very heterogeneous composition of protesting groups, lacking a defined 'identity', he beliefs what unites them is their networked strategy (Castells 2004: 148). For that reason this global opposition to capitalist globalization is worth looking into for us too.

Groups from all over the world, who all have their reasons for opposing capitalist globalization – for some this is environmental degradation, for others income inequality or poor labor conditions – are related in their struggles through a combination of internet networks, media diffusion, discussion forums and actual convergence at events (Ibidem: 151-2). Given their social, ethnic, political and ideological diversity, global networking is the main feature of these groups. In fact, these various strings of which the movement is built, do not necessarily call into question globalization *per se* (although some will), but rather act in favor of another version of globalization, a democratic and fair one. Those actions are to a large degree carried out on the internet. Protestors use email lists, chat rooms, forums and other places on the web to put their views forward, and they organise a wide debate without provoking actual confrontations. It allows for coordination and diversification at the same time.

According to Castells it is through the internet that relatively isolated movements have succeeded in building their networks of global solidarity and support, and have been able to post their information in real time, becoming less vulnerable to repression in their localities (Ibidem: 155). Although a political utopia for the moment, in some cases, the internet was even heralded as a new form of direct democracy, without the

intermediation of politicians. Despite the fact that these developments are still very much in the making, Castells underlines that the internet really offers a new form of social interaction, mobilization and decision-making. It means a lack of central authority and an instant relationship between the local and the global, action being anchored locally and performed globally (Ibidem: 156). Only because the movement actually *is* a network, can it combine so many interest groups into a collective actor. In summary, "the internet is of the essence in the anti-globalization movement, as a mobilizing medium, as a form of organisation and debate, and as a blueprint for the grassrooted, open, democratic society that the militants oppose to the seclusion and isolation of global corporate institutions" (Castells 2004: 164).

On the basis of Castells analysis it is easy to see why the conclusion, which we reached back in section 3.4.2 regarding the car system, of being a technology that is enabling and restraining at the same time, can also be applied to the world wide web. The freedom the car was said to offer in terms of personal transport and movement, is attributed to the web in terms of the freedom of self-expression, of publishing and gathering information, and of experimenting with one's identity. But just as the car created its own momentum, forcing its users into pre-conditioned ways of conduct and contributing to the fortification of car-related social and economic patterns, so the freedom the web brought is met with several constraints too. The web is part – or maybe *the* all-encompassing part – of a global system of communication media that runs on specific technical specifications, deals with social, cultural and ethical presuppositions, is subjected to the laws of economics, and has to cope with the political powers that be.

It is precisely because of this tension between free and forced behaviour as described above, that we can call human identity *ludic*. In the English language this distinction is aptly expressed by the familiar concepts of 'play' and 'game'. Another way of putting it is by referring to a game as 'finit play' (ludus) and play as 'infinite play' (paidea) as I explained this distinction with Carse in chapter 4. As I announced in the *prelude* already, by introducing the concept of playfulness we are now in a position to understand a phenomenon as complex and antagonistic as late modern identity in its coherence, and in its relation to developments in the field of new, digital media.

A game refers to the kind of activity theorists like Gadamer and Huizinga had in mind when they wrote about the phenomenon of gaming. That is, playing as a kind of rule-governed behaviour. Gadamer even dubbed this trait the *autonomy* of a game.[117] When leading our lives these days we are faced with multiple restrictions and forces that impinge upon us in the economic, technological, cultural and political sphere. The global market seems to run by its own logic and saddles us with socio-economic imperatives from which it is extremely difficult to withdraw oneself as an individual. We all know the example of the Windows versions that come with almost any PC one buys and the dominance of Google among the web's search-engines.[118] Mobile phones, email and messenger services put tremendous pressure on modern employees in terms of availability and required reaction speed. Websites are often run by moderators who not only post the majority of the entries on a site, but who are also in a position to screen, filter and modify what is posted by users. In general, newsmedia are by no means free of censorship: no news coverage is entirely 'objective', selections of newsworthy items have been made, information assymetry between newsmaker and consumers prevails, certain expressions may even be banned legally. As a counterpoint to corporate media, maybe user-generated platforms like Youtube provide us with a more democratic way of sharing news. All in all, when using the concepts of *play and game* in describing the process of identity formation in this age of digital media, the constituting power the social and economic environment, the technology and other interest-parties exert on identity formation as well as the freedom users enjoy, get emphasised to a degree that is more in accordance with the way the world currently works than seeing this process as merely a narrative. The medium's horizon and its parameters determine the *playroom* that is at the subject's disposal. Like playing a game we are submerged in an environment with its own dynamics, rules and codes that we follow up playfully.

Yet, because of this growing 'playfulness' the amount of freedom humans enjoy advances as well. Here we encounter the phenomenon of play in its sense of *infinite*, or *free* play. It is in this way that it has particularly been used by philosophers such as Kant, Schiller and Nietzsche, who all used the concept of play to point at human freedom and the capacity to rebel against the forces of nature. We now see why these

[117] See section 4.2.
[118] In 2005 already, for 80% of all internet searches Google was the first search engine consulted (Lehman & Schetsche 2005: 17).

two concepts are complementary and meet in modern web technology. As Frédéric Beigbeder writes in his novel *£ 9.99*: "We're living in the first system in which man is dominated by something against which even the concept of freedom is utterly powerless. Quite the opposite, in fact, it's banking on freedom, freedom is its greatest find… The system has achieved its goal: even disobedience has become a form of obedience" (Beigbeder 2002: 9). Concomitant to the underlying forces of commercialization, globalization and cultural domination that it helped spreading, the web banks on the illusion of freedom it creates. The world system is like a game that is so good that it makes its players forget about it. Still we have no alternative but to play.

As goes for most media these days, the web flourishes within a *cultural* field that is predominantly a global, commercial field ran by the logics of capitalism. In order to boost worldwide trade and the expansion of economies freedom often serves force: free trade and individual liberty of choice are heralded and proudly proclaimed as our dearest assets and precious rights, but in reality they serve to enforce vested commercial interests. For example, sponsored ads at Google and search engine optimizers – illegal programs that ensure a high ranking on the result list of search engines – are clever ways of targetting consumers without them being aware of their biased judgements. In *Modernity and self-identity* Anthony Giddens witnesses this paradox occurring when he writes about contemporary individuals: "In conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose" (Giddens 1991: 81). Today, identities are designed in this tension of compliance with structures and with cultural maxims, which – ironically – demand the same from anyone of us: to become individuals, to develop unique personalities, like the crowd in Monty Python's *Life of Brian* are proudly shooting out: 'we're all individuals!'. One could say that we are almost being forced to be free: on the one hand there is a freedom of choice, and a room for self-creation that no human being on the face of earth has experienced ever before, but on the other hand we can hardly be called autonomous actors given the superimposed ideology of individualization, self-creation and the beleaguering of individuals by commercial parties.

As we saw in section 3.4 the car already provided a striking example of this paradox. Although it gives a great deal of freedom to the individual driver – the freedom to move and the breaking of the constrictions our physiology places us under – it also

created a culture of mobility that leaves no option for slowing down. The same can be said about web technologies. Consumers may be called *prosumers* (producer-consumers) nowadays because of the creative freedom modern computer programs and web applications offer. A weblog offers its user a set of tools that – within the margins offered by the blog's creators – enable her to 'playfully' design her site according to her own wishes. Open Source Software goes a step further and puts technically proficient users in a position to suggest software modifications and possibly contribute to its amelioration. Equally, though, we are stuck with all kinds of electronic devices that call for frequent updating or replacement, in order to stay in touch with those who already updated their devices. At a certain point in time a personal computer becomes simply too meager in calculating and storage capacity to run the newest software, compelling the user to either seriously upgrade it or to buy a new one altogether. The same goes for software updates, which in many cases even download themselves automatically onto our computers. Refusing to 'go with the flow' therefore is no longer an option, neither for professionals nor private users, and equals opting out by committing digital suicide. Our freedom to use or stay away from certain hardware or software applications is severely limited by technological developments outside the realm of influence by the individual, choices made by employers or providers, and by the sheer power of numbers.

In that sense computer technologies are no different from any other technology. Our dependence on both media of communication and media of transport has nothing but steadfastly grown during the two century-old course of progressing industrialization and the even older history of globalization. It might not be at the forefront of our awareness all the time – if at any moment at all – but without the help of modern computer technology our societies would swiftly grind to a devastating halt. The internet – and the web: its best known and most used incarnation – created their own *technological momentum* in their hitherto short lives (Cf. section 3.4.1.3). The stronger our grip on nature becomes, the more dependent on media we become. Until nature strikes back, of course. Imagine a vast power failure hitting our most densely populated areas due to extreme weather: this means no more television, no more electronic data traffic, no more mobile phones operating, no radio, not even artificial light in our homes, plus thawing refrigerators! And I am not even talking about hospitals, schools, office buildings, traffic lights, elevators, industrial complexes, an so on, and so on.

Modern life as we know it and want to live it simply ceases to be for the time of the outage. This shows our dependence on modern energy, communication and transportation technology, as well as how little autonomous we have become in choosing whether we want to use these or not. Our survival literally depends on them.

It is a feature of technology in general to deploy itself in manners unforeseen by its inventors. When adopting new technologies societies find themselves confronted with the so-called *control dilemma*. Stakeholders have to decide on the adoption of a certain technology when its later effect on society, and the way the technology itself will be used and its further development, are not yet known. Shortly after its introduction, when a technology is only scarcely diffused and little known among the public, a technology might still be highly pliable. But once it has locked into society on a vast scale, it tends to gain momentum of its own and deliberate attempts at steering it in a certain direction become ever more difficult. Again, the case of automobility in chapter three provided clear evidence of the almost unsurmountable task to alter a proven and widely established technology, even if its downsides are overwhelming *and* known to its users, as is the case with cars in regard to their pollution levels, huge energy consumption and CO2 emissions. Antropomorphising slightly, one could purport that technological artefacts have their 'own agendas': with the design and introduction of them a bit of new reality is designed as well (Cf. Smit & Van Oost 1999). A race car is not built to drive 30 miles an hour; neither can we expect the web ever to be free of spam and porn. Or as the popular proverb goes: 'The things you own, end up owning you'.

Another important force that puts restrictions on our use of the web, one that we should by no means underestimate, is the power of *governments*. I only need reminding the reader of the origins of the internet, which came into being as a communications network of the American Department of Defense, and which is for its swift workings and infrastructure still highly dependent on governmental systems such as cables, satellites, energy systems and legal regulations. An example might show the limits of freedom experienced on the web. In the spring of 2006 the Chinese internet pioneer Isaac Mao visited the Netherlands to talk about the millions of weblogs that are being created in his home country. Approximately five million of them appeared in the years 2003 to 2006 alone. According to Mao people who *blog* on a daily basis 'get to think

more freely'. He recounts that by having discussions on the web and building websites the Chinese learn to express their individuality. A new sense of openness and connectedness to the world is arising. Meanwhile, Mao himself had to alter his IP-adress due to a blockade by the Chinese government and his current weblog is still not accessible in China. (Source: NRC-Handelsblad, dd. 31-03-2006) Google and Yahoo cut lucrative deals with the Chinese authorities just to access the immense Chinese market, yet agreeing to work within severe limitations of their information supply. Google even actively screens its search results to not fall out with the Chinese government. Yahoo, eBay and Microsoft had already placed themselves under self-censorship on their websites. Economic value seems to outweigh the moral value of freedom of speech.[119]

At the moment, Chinese internet serves as a scaring example of the restrictions governments can – if they choose to – impose on their citizens: every bit of information deemed dangerous by Party officials is kept out of the country by powerful gatekeepers: a Chinese citizen looking for information about *Free Tibet*, for example, will not be able to get to the websites searched after.[120] Also internally web traffic is closely monitored and if necessary officials take action. The Chinese themselves have put 30.000 (!) 'digital servants' on monitoring-jobs, so as to control discussions held in chatrooms and on webforums. Several webloggers already have been arrested, after they spoke out critically of politically sensitive issues. Lots of other Chinese too have been apprehended and sentenced because of their actions and utterances online (Cf Goldsmith & Wu 2008: 87-104).

One might object here that inventive users will always find ways to get around controls and get to the information they desire. This is of course true, but the Chinese situation clearly shows that the web is by no means the revolutionary cyberterritory which transgresses national boundaries and laws, in which everyone can act in utmost freedom as control mechanisms fail, such as might have been hoped for in the early days of the web. Even the *world wide* web turns out to be firmly anchored nationally,

[119] In January 2010, Google announced they were no longer willing to censor their search results and would review their business operations in China after several hacking attempts seriously compromised the privacy of users, as the attackers tried hacking Gmail accounts of both Chinese and Western human rights activists.

[120] The Chinese government does so by using gatekeepers at nodes where international data lines enter their country, blocking foreign websites that are deemed a 'danger' to the State. Chinese web users will get a message like 'website temporarily out of order' (See: Goldsmith & Wu 2008: 93).

regionally and locally, in language, legislation, culture and in infrastructure. Governments in particular can wield a lot of power as they are able to block sites, criminalize the possession of unethical information, or even take sites off the air altogether. In *Who controls the Internet?* Goldsmith and Wu reach the conclusion that "What we have seen, time and time again, is that physical coercion by government – the hallmark of a traditional legal system – remains far more important than anyone expected" (Goldsmith & Wu 2008: 180). According to them this is the most important thing missing from predictions of where globalization will lead and from visions on the future shape of the internet.

The China example epitomises the antagonistic forces the web evokes, both enabling the Chinese government to practice more control over its citizens, and at the same time handing those citizens a medium for potential subversive action.[121] History will tell which side played the game best. But China is by far not the only example of the liberating powers the web possesses.

6.2 Playing with others: the web as social network

The person has become the portal.

Barry Wellman

From a social point of view, a lot of modern technologies are highly ambivalent in their nature. For one they provide a window to the world, they open up lives, but they also close people in and serve as capsules. Technologies such as the mobile phone, the I-Pod and cars connect people and turn their lives public, but they are also very private media and enable their users to shield from others. As I stated in the *prelude* already, on the *web* we are more than ever caught between these tendencies of individualization and capsularization on the one, and communication and community building on the other hand. The web is both a source of reflexive uncertainty and computer-mediated

[121] In addition to blogging, in the spring of 2010 it was made public that Twitter was working on ways to get round blockades in China and Iran. Co-founder Evan Williams told an audience at the World Economic Forum in Davos that Twitter is developing technology aimed at preventing the governments of China and Iran from censoring Tweets. (On: http://www.wired.com)

isolation, and it serves as a new, high-tech layer of social cement. In this section, I explore this paradox further by looking – among other things – at the social network site *Facebook*, which is not only one of the most popular sites on the web, but which constitutes also a prime example of this paradox.[122] I seek to illustrate in which way Facebook reinforces the paradox by introducing aspects of playfulness.

6.2.1 Facebook: individualized society or social individuals?

If you want to understand what is happening in the field of new media, then it is always insightful to look at the newest generation of users. In a double sense they are generally the 'early adaptors' of new media appliances. To adolescents the web serves more as a medium for communication than as a medium for information, clearly in contrast to the post-war generations who – besides their professional use – still use the web predominantly as a tool for collecting information.[123] The difference between young and older users is not so much the use of the web itself – we all *google* – but it lies in the frequency of use and the multimedial combination of social media they apply. Not surprisingly, therefore, persons born after 1980 are commonly referred to as being part of the *digital generation*. Journalists and scientists have given this generation many different names, ranging from *internet generation*, to *dotcom generation*, *network generation*, *Nintendo generation*, *sms generation*, *screenagers*, *generation M* (media) and *generation C* (content) (Cf. De Haan & Van 't Hof 2006: 11). Recently, a label with very positive connotations was added to this list: *Generation Einstein*.[124] One of the pre-eminent characteristics of this generation is their savvy use of social network sites and the impact this has on their identities. According to Jos De Haan: "Young people of the same age group give birth to peer-to-peer networks, within which

[122] In June 2010, Alexa.com, a company which rates internet traffic, places the two best-known social network sites, Facebook and Youtube, among the top 3 sites visited, only beaten by search engine Google. Other big social network sites are: MySpace, Sugababes/Superdudes, CU2, Partypeeps.
[123] See for a stat: www.marketingfacts.nl/berichten/generatieverschil_in_internetgebruik/nl
[124] See: Boschma & Groen, *Generatie Einstein – slimmer ('smarter'), sneller ('faster') en socialer ('more social')*. The authors claim that in order to understand the current generation of young, techno-savvy users, we have to realize that instead of seeying them as lazy screen addicts who have forgotten how to read a book and write decent papers, we should acknowledge the fact that in terms of communication through new media they have become smarter, faster and more social than their parents' generation.

youngsters discuss taboes and life choices and experiment with their identities. [...] Online 'experiments' teach them who they are and what their position within the social network is".[125]

As I said above, *Facebook* is worldwide the largest of those social network sites. Founded only in February 2004, in July 2010 Facebook already had more than 500 million active subscribers.[126] Due to its make-up, Facebook can be seen both as a site for individual entertainment, and as a tool for maintaining and building communities. Next to the 'standard' features of typical social network sites, such as creating an (elaborate) personal profile, searching for and adding friends and communicating with them by using private messages, wall comments, pokes or chat, Facebook also offers a range of game-like applications (micro-games) and hosts numerous groups and communities one can subscribe to.

The 2006 report *The Strength of Internet Ties* shows the big advantage of online social networking for users in terms of performing their social identity.[127] The authors found that using internet and email expands and strengthens the social ties people maintain in the off-line world. Pay-offs especially come when people use the internet to press their social networks into action as they face major challenges and have to make important decisions. Facebook is particularly suited for reinforcing so called 'weak ties', for example for finding old classmates or colleagues. Facebook keeps chapters open of books that otherwise would have been firmly closed, apart maybe from the occasional coincidental real-life encounter. In that sense, Facebook keeps the past alive in the present. The report strongly disputes that heavy use of the internet might diminish people's social relations: email for example, rather than replacing it, supplements the communication people have with others in their network.

Social network sites in particular create this peculiar paradox among their users of being alone in front of a terminal and talking to buddies at the same time. The web not only brings the world into your living room; it also keeps you there. Also, social network sites are the ultimate embodiment of the identity paradoxes caused by progressing globalization, such as I drafted them in section 3.4. Social network sites are

[125] De Haan & Van 't Hof 2006: 17,18. Author's translation
[126] For more mind-boggling figures on Facebook see:
http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics#!/press/info.php?statistics
[127] This paragraph is based on: Boase, J., Horrigan, J., Wellman, B. & Rainie, L., *The Strength of Internet Ties*, Washington, 2006. Full report at:
http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/172/report_display.asp

prime examples of what it means to live in a highly mediated, *globalized* world, but they also provide the tools for the construction, expression and experience of highly *personal* (and often local) identities. The global and the local intermingle in such a way as to create a 'glocal' form of contemporary life, infused by multiple media, in which we chat with someone in India but sometimes no longer even know our neighbours. On the one hand network sites facilitate encountering the like-minded, on the other hand they give us a platform to cross swords with intellectual opponents: it can widen our horizon, but also dangerously narrow it. The web may easily serve as a 'homophilic' medium: if so wished, it can be used to drive you around in familiar circles, until the point where opinions become certainties. As Kenneth Gergen observed about social technologies: "The major point here is that the technologies that bring people together also allow them to remain together, to insulate themselves in a way that permits the sacralization of a dangerously restricted view" (Gergen 2000: xvi). Religious extremism is a dangerous example of this ambivalence. In doing so, a website like Facebook is in danger of creating what can be called 'bounded solidarity': groups (of interest, or ideas) are being reinforced to such a high degree, their 'tie' becomes so strong, that it causes them to close themselves off from other parts of society.

A medium as universal as the world wide web was simply non-existent until two decades ago. Therefore, the task of adjusting all the possibilities in terms of communication and all the information that comes with it, presents a monumental task to its users, and forces them into reassessing their identities. Not in the last place, the world wide web with its capacity of linking people, transactions and money globally by a mere mouse click, contributed to, or maybe even was the final stage – the missing link so to speak – of the process that turned us into truly global citizens. Incredible for someone living a mere thirty years ago, the world wide web placed the world – literally – within arm's reach. I only need picking the right website to watch live what is happening in China, Australia or the Americas, while I chat with a colleague in Africa and check my banking account in the Netherlands! There we see why it is called the *world wide* web.

In the past, several other media showed the same tendency of spurring both individualistic and social forces. Modern technologies have always advocated schizophrenic lifestyles. The novel opened up universes of the mind to its readers, but it also confined them to small reading spaces and a very constricted field of attention.

The vacuum cleaner was supposed to liberate wives from streneous, physical tasks, but turned them into housewives instead as the housekeeper was no longer needed. In chapter 3 I mentioned modern appartment blocks, which bring hundreds of people in close proximity, but the doors of which often remain tightly shut. A fitting early example of this paradox is the so-called *flaneur*, a typical product of the modern city: "The anonymity of the crowd provided asylum for those on the margins of society who could walk about unnoticed, observing and being observed, but never really interacting with those encountered. The *flaneur* was the modern hero, able to travel, to arrive, to gaze, to move on, to be anonymous, to be in a limited zone; in other words to be out in public and moving about in the city's paved, public spaces among strangers" (Urry 2007: 69). Paul Virilio noticed a similar phenomenon about the introduction of cinema: "This machine plunges inert cinemagoers into an unprecedented form of solitude, *multiple solitude*, since, as Marcel Pagnol so aptly puts it, a thousand spectators are reduced to one in the cinema auditorium!" (Virilio1998: 9).

Facebook not only takes Pagnol's *multiple solitude* to the next level; rather, it couples multiple solitude to *soloistic multitude*: its users are on their own embedded in groups. Barry Wellman coined the appropriate expression of 'networked individualism' to explain the social consequences of social network sites. Users of modern technologies are less tied to local groups and increasingly tied to looser and more geographically scattered networks. Wellman writes:

> "The personalization, portability, ubiquitous connectivity, and imminent wireless mobility of the Internet all facilitate neworked individualism as the basis of community. It is the individual, and neither the household nor the group that is becoming the primary unit of connectivity: gleaning support, sociability, information and a sense of belonging. [...] It is I-alone that is reachable wherever I am: at a house, hotel, office, highway, or shopping center. The person has become the portal."
> (Wellman ea. 2005: 34).

In section 5.2.2 I explained that one of the distinguishing features of web 2.0 is its artificial intelligence: in many respects the web has become smart and it sometimes even (pro)acts instead of its users. This smartening of the web gave users an

opportunity for greater customization, for making the web not only more social, but again, also more individualistic. To take Facebook as an example again: its shareholders gain their revenue almost exclusively through advertising, which can be targeted very specifically due to data mining users' profiles. This introduces one of the biggest downsides Facebook users face: over the years Facebook developed a policy of sharing more and more information from subscribers' profiles. Actually, its success to a large degree depends on this strategy: Facebook became really popular when its builders tweaked the site in such a way that users were given the (unasked for) functionality of tracking all their friends' moves on Facebook. A company with access to your profile may get information on who your friends are, where you live, what your hobbies are, your age, education, etcetera. In short: on your identity. In 2010 the debate on Facebook's 'open access' policy became more heated and forced its designers to implement some changes to limit users' visibility for the sake of their privacy and safety.[128]

Following the line of reasoning about identity I deployed in chapter 3, the question rises whether web communities replace traditional off-line communities as as source of meaning? How much do Facebook contacts really mean to us? Does blogging and chatting take the place of the local pub, school and workplace? Philosopher of technology Albert Borgmann coined (after Heidegger) the concept of 'focal object', by which he meant that technological objects 'assemble' people and activitities in a certain way (Cf. Borgmann 1984: 196-210). In old times the fireplace ('focus' = hearth) was the designated spot for people to gather and bond by telling stories and by experiencing physical warmth and intimacy. Although Borgmann laments its loss in modern times (central heating system), the concept of 'focal object' is a very fitting metaphore to describe the role of media in modern day lives. Television and radio in particular have for decades been the focal objects in homes around which families got together to watch the evening news and subsequent television shows. In this sense television is characterized by the very same paradox of making life more individualistic, as individual families withdraw from the streets into their homes. Yet, this process also meant the strengthening of inner-family bonds, which is why it contributed to a stronger sense of (the nuclear) community.

[128] Go for an overview of the debate to:
www.readwriteweb.com/archives/facebook_privacy_explanation_debate.php

The web 'collects' people in an entirely different way than television does. First of all, television gathers people physically: people who watch together share a designated space together; they talk about what they see on the screen, laugh about it, sometimes even cry.[129] A desktop computer or laptop on the other hand hampers the physical sharing of experiences. At best two people – though already uncomfortable – can watch web pages or internet movies together. In case that the movie clip or site is shared with someone else, that person will likely watch the clip on her own computer. *Personal* computers are not designed for being used by multiple people at the same time, such as a television invites people to watch together. In that spatio-temporal sense, PCs separate people, whereas television unites them. Communicating via social network sites on a personal computer is characterized by this paradoxical feature of isolating people and bringing them (virtually) together at the same time.

Second, another important difference between the web and television/radio as tools for social cohesion is the tailoring of information that takes place on the web (2.0). Whereas television and radio are broadcasting media, that is, one program is sent out to a multitude of viewers or listeners who all receive the same program, the web is typically a narrowcasting medium: users can specifically target and retrieve the information they desire. As the technology behing the web grows more sophisticated, the presentation of information and the manner of communication become ever more attuned to individual users' desires. Because of this 'interactive' feature of the web, one could purport that the web's influence on users' identities is a rather conservative one, as users' interests, opinions and desires are increasingly mirrored by the web itself. The eight o'clock news does not discriminate between its viewers, but someone wachting the news on her smartphone may decide about which news to download into her podcast and which not. Despite the option of 'zapping away' on television, on the web the consolidation of one's identity in terms of held interests and opinions is much more likely to happen than on television, which can be very shocking and confronting at times.

[129] Of course, people not present, but who saw a certain program form a reference group as well, be it later, when the show is commented on. Especially in the context of on-demand TV.

6.2.2 Serious play in the digital world?

In chapter 4 we concluded that playfulness is the expression of the ambivalence between seriousness and non-seriousness that is constitutive of all playing. On the grounds of the analysis presented in the above section, we can now argue that Facebook is an outstanding example of how web 2.0 applications hand users the tools to practise this (in late modern identity) characteristic mix of seriousness and frivolity. Even more so, by means of social network sites the web provides the perfect stage to people to apply playful, light and frivolous self-presentations as a way of dealing with the utter seriousness and social pressure underlying the process of gaining status and the building of group identities. Raessens writes: "The most important play media in this context are undoubtedly mobile telephones and so-called social media, such as weblogs and social networks, including Facebook, Hyves, LinkedIn and Twitter. These are ideal social connections that playfully express what the users think they are and how they wish to be seen by others" (Raessens 2009: 68).

In reminiscence of the examples presented in section 6.1, in the case of social network sites we come across the same paradox of the technology offering its users extra playroom for expressing themselves freely, but at the same time web 2.0 applications pre-arrange online actions more than the ideologists of freedom might wish for. In the case of Facebook, users may decide on the content of their profiles, but they are certainly not free to redesign the software or tell Facebook what advertisers to allow on the site. Also, strong pressure from peers is exerted to take part in social networking and to develop attractive and impressive personal profiles with preferably many friends. In this sense, users are more or less 'forced' into self-reflection by means of constructing personal profiles.

Social network sites have become increasingly important within the context of leading a modern day's life. As I explained by paraphrasing Barry Wellman in the former section, people derive their sense of belonging from the 'placeless' networks they create around themselves. The same can be observed in mobile devices, such as mobile phones, which for their part are said to create 'lonely crowds', in which people are in a public space, but are completely absorbed by their communication with someone who is physically not present. Mediated communication seems to precede physical presency, thereby creating new social effects formerly unheard of. Who we are is determined by

the relations with other people we engage in. Had he known Facebook, Descartes would probably have reached the conclusion "I am linked in, therefore I am"!

The individualization media have caused, starting with written texts millennia ago, gave an impulse to self-reflection and threw people back on their own by creating the perfect stage for self-dialogues. The construction of weblogs, personal profiles and homepages add the voice of others to this process; others who comment on expressions of identity. This growing reflexivity obviously reflects on users' identities: a lack of contacts/friends on Facebook can be an important (negative) element of someone's self-understanding. In this respect Facebook resembles a competition, with excellence in the social realm as a goal: the more friends, the higher someone's status. Just as Twitter is all about one's followers, Facebook too has become a sport of collecting online friends.

The playful character of these web applications renders this 'burden' of constant reflection and updating one's social network bearable. For example, social network sites allow a playful handling of photos, pictures and the moderation of them. They leave exuberant room for jokes, for the posting of funny messages or clips, and for the challenging and teasing of friends. The speed one can react with and the flexibility to adjust one's profile any time render the long-term effects of these profiles less grave. In an article on social network sites Pearson comes to a similar conclusion: "In essence, online performative space is a deliberately playful space. The fluidity and self-conscious platforms of performance allow individuals and networks of users to play with aspects of their presentations of self, and the relationship of those online selves to others without inadvertently risking privacy" (Pearson 2009: 6). Social network sites resemble games, because acting on them is characterized by a playful mood and has playful elements to it (humour, competition, teasing), but also because they constitute a world on their own. A world in which we can experiment a bit with our identity, without suffering immediate and direct consequences outside of the cybersphere.

Because of their 'networked individualistic' features, Valentina Rao calls applications such as facebook in an article on playful cultures 'third places' (a concept she took from Oldenburg): "The general mood in third places is playful and marked by frivolity, verbal wordplay, and wit" (Oldenburg, in Rao 2008: 2). Third places "exist in addtition to 'work' or 'home', a contemporary version of the agora, the tavern, the café, where people can be together and unwind. The dichotomy between organised play (often

sustained by corporate interests) and free play and playfulness as in socialization is especially visible in social networks" (Ibidem). As another example of such a 'third place', that is, a novel kind of semi-public, mediated sphere, one can think of the social websites developed and used by immigrants. *Maroc.nl,* for instance, is a site on which an extremely playful approach is applied to the utter serious matter of finding one's way around a new culture. Maroccans are clearly trying to steer a middle course, and develop a sort of 'third way', caught between two cultures. They do this by coupling self-mockery to profound discussions about who they are and where they belong. As a result, next to cartoons of Dutch right-wing poilitician Geert Wilders, heated discussions are being held on forums about topics immigrants are concerned with. Again, humour and irony prove an important factor in dealing with important issues.

In section 5.1 I pointed at the risk of 'capsularization' in the context of establishing group identities on the web: very closed, inward looking communities of like-minded people. Without judging this development and calling this feature of social websites 'right' or 'wrong' – after all, technologies have always been used for the worse or the better, for war or peace – we can understand this phenomenon as an example of the ludification of the web. Similar to what happens in games, these people create meaningful worlds of their own, the logic and the sense of which is hard to understand to outsiders. Just like in games, community members 'play' these games alone, in front of their terminals, but are – by virtue of playing – part of a very strong, wider community.

The dividing line, though, between the playworld and the 'serious world outside' is a thin one. Identity theft, to mention a frequently heard threat, is just one of the very real consequences avid users of online services might experience. In section 4.3, where I explained the phenomenon of play, I drew quite a sharp distinction between the play world and the world outside play. As many examples show, this distinction is by far not as solid as I might have presented it there. Not only is all playing ambivalent by its nature, that is, serious and 'only play' at the same time, but even more so, a general intertwining of play and (social) reality appears to exist.

In *Homo Ludens* Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1950) demonstrated the play-element of culture. Instead of mentioning mere practices of play *within* cultures, he convincingly presented his argument that human culture as such evolves playfully. In social reality many processes run by the logic of 'make believe', as if all of us were

playing a game. Think for example of the purchasing power of money, or the legislative powers we invest in our politicians: politicians own power because people bestow it on them. As soon as a people by majority decide to stop 'playing the game', rulers lose their authority. Therefore, in many social instances the choice is not between play or non-playful, serious reality, but play and reality really are one. The same goes for social network sites: their *affordance* (see section 3.4) is their playfulness: they invite users to playfully interact with each other and with the medium, knowing of the serious social mechanisms that are at play. Social network sites are 'serious games': the line between play and reality is inevitably blurred. Online, all identities are to some degree playful identities.

6.3 Playing with reality

> When you get right down to it all pleasure consists in playing around with one's own boundary, or someone else's…
>
> *Daniel Dennett*

In 1995 Sherry Turkle wrote her prophetic work *Life on the screen – identity in the age of the internet*. In this book she described the – then novel – internet as a network system that was able to link millions of people and which changed 'the way we think, the nature of our sexuality, the form of our communities, our very identities' (Turkle 1995: 9). According to Turkle in the real-time communities of cyberspace, we are dwellers on the threshold between the real and the virtual, unsure of our footing, and inventing ourselves as we go along (Ibidem: 10). The central thesis put forward by Turkle involves the view that it was cyberspace, which made experimenting with identities truly possible, as opposed to merely playing different social roles in more primitive societies under the rule of analogous media. The difference between 'old' and 'new', online media, lies in the latter' simultaneity. Turkle writes about Multi-User Domains/Dungeons (MUDs):

> "As players participate, they become authors not only of text but of themselves, constructing new selves through social interaction. One player says, "Your are the character and you are not the character, both at the same time." Another says, "You are who you pretend to be." MUDs provide worlds for anonymous social interaction in which one can play a role as close to or as far away from one's 'real self' as one chooses. [...] MUDs make possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion. Identity, after all, refers to the sameness between two qualities, in this case between a person and his or her persona. But in MUDs, one can be many." (Turkle 1995: 12)

The feature of cyberspace which renders this multiplicity and fluidity possible, according to Turkle – a feature we no longer acknowledge as anything special whatsoever – is modern PCs capacity to work in simultaneous *windows*. Although users are attentive to only one of the windows on their screens at any given moment, in a sense they are a presence in all of them (Turkle 1995: 13-14). It lead one of Turkle's interviewees to the famous sentence "Real Life is just one more window". Turkle sees in the practice of playing simultaneous roles in multiple windows a decentering of the self, on a much more profound level than just the stepping in and out of characters in social settings. "MUDs, in contrast, offer parallel identities, parallel lives" (Turkle 1995: 14).

These analyses by Sherry Turkle make it clear why, on many occasions, it is difficult to draw a clear-cut line between play and non-play in online environments, and between reality and appearance. As I explained in chapter 4, when playing we seem to engage in our 'second lives': shifting between the worlds of being and appearance. Playful environments encourage us to do 'as if'. Supposed fixed identities in the material world give way to multiple identities in the (virtual) playworld. The more we identify with our online characters, the smaller the gap between reality and appearance. As a result, a hybrid type of identity emerges, which is no longer completely explicable in terms of narrative identity. In chapter 2 I emphasised that the theory of narrative identity formation is particularly instructive to explain and concordate the biographical elements of someone's identity. But, as we have seen above, many aspects of modern

identities expressed and experienced online elude sheer narrative accounts of identity. In addition to the theory of narrativity, the concept of playfulness emphasises the openness and multilinear character of identity, just as a game virtually has an endless number of possible variaties and outcomes. Like the way games are played over and over again, human identities remain under construction during the course of a life. And just like life, games have a high degree of uncertainty (about the outcome) attached to them: their course cannot be pre-determined. In Joost Raessens' words: "It is a characteristic of new digital media that they do not restrict the user's playing space to this interpretive flexibility (or creative receptiveness), but expand it into the reconfiguration of existing texts or (re)construction of new texts" (Raessens 2009: 68).

Therefore, more justice is done to the experimental qualities of the web in a theory of playful identities, than it is in a theory of narrative identity. The web enables a *playing with reality*, which advances the paradox of identity vs. multiplicity, and which provokes a continuous shifting between the worlds of being and appearing, in a way that is many steps beyond the realm of possibilities the traditional book offers. Sherry Turkle explicitely compared this process to playing:

> "Play has always been an important aspect of our individual efforts to build identity. The psychoanalyst Erik Erikson called play a 'toy situation' that allows us to 'reveal and commit' ourselves 'in its unreality'. While MUDs are not the only 'places' in the Internet in which to play with identity, they provide an unparellelled opportunist for such play. On a MUD one actually gets to build character and environment and then to live within the toy situation. A MUD can become a context for discovering who one is and whishes to be. In this way, the games are laboratories for the construction of identity, .." (Turkle 1995: 184).

Playful web environments encourage us to do 'as if', to take on roles out of the ordinary order. Erika Pearson reaches the same conclusion as she writes: "In essence, online performative space is a deliberately *playful* space" (Pearson 2009: 6; Italic: jt). This role playing can become so strong an experience as to forget what the 'real' world is or import characteristics into it. The gap between reality and appearance closes. Play always contains an element of make-believe: it goes accompanied by an awareness of a

second reality against real life.[130] Even the development of the web itself, from web 1.0 to web 2.0, can be explained as a development from linear to playful.

One of the main features of this *playful* web is the user mobility it advances. Not physically, obviously, but mobility in regard to all the different online 'worlds' and social contexts users can be part of. As networks grew faster, databases increased their capacity, and the calculating power of microchips rose, it became increasingly easy for web users to engage in multiple online activities simultaneously and keep track – in almost real time – of what was happening in many places, and even play their part in those happenings. From one, principle (biographical) story people in late modernity used the web to go to many instances of play. Social networks and virtual worlds undermine the unity of time and place, which was characteristic of the plot in traditional storytelling. Therefore, instead of narratieve identity, we should rather speak of *micro-narratives*, which are part of the playful construction of collages of identity.

The narrative is surely not gone, as I will explain further on - at the beginning of section 7.1, but thanks to the advancement of the world wide web it has been encompassed by a culture of constructing and expressing highly mobile, flexible and multi-facetted modern day identities, in which users playfully switch between their many roles, situations and hence, their identities. Ironically, this caused the narrative to be much more pervasive in our culture than it used to be. In the old days only a handful of people were in a position to write a log, an autobiography or a novel and publish it. Now that billions of people have access to online facilities such as blogs, homepages, network sites and Twitter, these micro-narratives abound on the web.

Because of the multiple paths one can follow on the web, does computertechnology as a hypermedium create a world characterized by processes without closure, which are multilinear, repeatable, and offer virtually endless possibilities. Kenneth Gergen observed about living in an age of social media of saturation: "Under postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction; it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to reflexive questionning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality" (Gergen 2000: 7)". Being playful means one seizes the opportunity of stepping out of

[130] Roger Silverstone came to a similar observation in 1999, when he wrote about media: "To acknowledge that so much of culture, our culture, our media culture, consists in the acceptance of the 'as-if'ness' of the world. […] Play is 'as-if' culture *par excellence*" (Silverstone 1999: 59-60).

oneself for a moment, seeing oneself with different eyes, with a touch of irony, critical distance and room for relativization, in order to reach a higher level of self-understanding. Winter, Thomas, and Hepp even go as far as to deny the possibility of a 'closed, lineair biography' in late modernity, and talk of 'strings that cross one another' instead, as constituent of reflexive identity construction (Winter, Thomas, Hepp 2003: 11).

Those crossing strings are an apt symbol for how hypertext influences identity construction. Identities are the temporary knots where strings meet: firm, but never lasting. Dealing with identity in a highly mediatized, network environment means walking those strings, acting like the spider in her web. A spider who is continuously working her web, but never knows what virtual insect will get caught in her web next.

Chapter 7

Conclusion -

Playful identities on the web

7.1 Beyond narrativity: playful identity

As has been shown in chapter 2, the theory of narrative identity formation is a very powerful theory to describe to process of constructing and expressing human identities. To a large extent, it also adequately describes the mechanisms of online identity construction. Let me ennumerate three pivotal elements of the theory, which apply to both off-line and online identity construction. First of all, according to the theory of narrative identity, all construction of identities takes places via the detour of expression. That is to say, no identity exists beyond its expression and by reflecting on our expressions we polish and continuously rephrase the narrative we tell about ourselves, a narrative we use to reach self-understanding. In the case of web expressions of identity, homepages and social network sites in particular, this feature is even more present and easier to achieve than in the case of told or written stories, since the expression of identities and the interactive process of entering into dialogue about identities are the *essence* of web pages and online profiles.

Also, equal to expressing identities orally or written on paper, introspection forms a crucial moment in the experience and expression of identities. Both books and the web are highly reflexive media. This brings me to the second element of narrative identity formation that is shared by online identities: the fact that all identity, in its construction as well as its expression, is always mediated. The narrative serves as a means for reflecting on ourselves, on others and on the world. This threefold mediation also applies to websites. In order to express our identity we need to at least *think* about it, *say* it, or *act* in a certain way. All three of these elements of the expression of identities are present in online identity expression: before composing a homepage, for example, one is forced to *think* about one's identity; then one *tells* others by means of the content

one makes visible on the site; and the process of composing the site, thinking about what to put on it, discussing it and receiving feedback, is a way of *acting* in an online environment, comparable to acting in an off-line world. In this way, compared to the oral or written story, the web serves as an all-encompassing multi-medium for achieving self-understanding, in which there is still room for the actual telling of stories.

In the third place, homepages, blogs and social network sites play a similar role in people's (professional) lives as stories did before, by handing them a tool for – literally – grasping their lives. The expression of identity, of life plans, opinions, interests, etcetera. is the perfect way to organise one's life. The difference between stories and websites lies in the mode of espression; whereas a story is extremely explicit, "Facebook users predominantly claim their identities implicitely rather than explicitely: they 'show rather than tell' and stress group and consumer identities over personally narrated ones" (Zao, Grasmuck, Martin 2008: 1816).[131] Although narrative elements are still abundantly present on websites, we can, due to the visual nature of the web, safely argue that online identities have become much more pictorial rather than narrative.

Of course I would not need writing this thesis, if there were only similarities between stories and websites. The final observation already indicated the point where 'old' and 'new' media diverge: the web has properties that elude the written or spoken narrative, and which are therefore beyond the reach of the theory of narrative identity formation. What are these properties?

One of the most striking extra-narrative features of the web is its appeal to interactivity. The interactivity of the web can be found in multiple modes of use: we can speak of 'user to system interactivity' (surfing), 'user to user interactivity' (social sites), and – lately – user to document interactivity' (programs that help with in creating files; work-sharing; cloud computing) (Cf. McMillan 2002: 162-82). Whereas in its early days in the nineties web 1.0 was mainly concerned with presenting

[131] "Facebook users predominantly claim their identities implicitly rather than explicitly; they 'show rather than tell' and stress group and consumer identities over personally narrated ones": What the authors found is that 91-95% of expressions of identity are very implicit (wall posts, pictures), 48-73% are implicit/slightly explicit (eg.membership of interest groups), and only 8-37% of expressions are explicit ("about me ..") (Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin 2008: 1816, 1824-26).

information, one could purport that, during its 20 years of development, the web too went from broadcasting – sending few messages to few large audiences – to narrowcasting – sending many messages to many small audiences. As the development of web 2.0 progressed, the web became ever more of a two-way street.

Cantoni and Tardini write about the interactivity of websites: "In the case of hypertexts, interactivity can be seen as a particular kind of *dialogue*: by means of links, hypertext readers engage in a continuous dialogue with the hypertext system. The peculiarity of hypertextual dialogue is that in them the system/hypertext poses the question, the user/reader answers, and the system in its turn *re-acts* to the answer posing another question: […] "What do you want afterwards?"" (Cantoni & Tardini 2006: 77). In general, hypertextuality is probably what sets traditional, written stories and websites most apart. The term 'hypertext' was coined in 1965 by Theodor Holm Nelson, who defined it as 'a body of written or pictorial material interconnected in such a complex way that it could not conveniently be presented or represented on paper' (Cantoni & Tardini 2006: 90-1). In hypertext "elements can be arbitrarily connected to each other; by means of links every object can be made the sign of any other object. In this way, the hypertextual structure can proceed endlessly" (Cantoni & Tardini 2006: 95).

This feature of websites is in obvious contrast to the written narrative, where there is no choice at all for readers in terms of what they want to read afterwards: turning the page is their only option. Because of hypertextuality, the linearity of traditional identity expression in the form of biographical books gives way to biographical patchworks of digital elements, referring to each other through links; a process, which is characterized by fragmentation, openness and multilinearity. In order to understand websites such as blogs, homepages or profile sites properly, we have to understand the wider context in which these sites are embedded. The links that make up this context, on their part, can be added by the author of the website herself, or by others who link to this website.

As a result, web 'stories', or better 'collages' of identity pieces, are continuously under siege by systemic external intruders, such as pop-ups, updates, cookies, ads, etcetera., as well as the comments and reactions one gets from others. So, in sharp

contrast to classical theory of narrative identity, processes of innovation and sedimentation of new information and new life's happenings not only take place in the life of the author, who has to give them a concordant place in her self-narrative; but online, the expression of identity itself, in the form of a personal page, is constantly being beleaguered by outer influences. To mention a couple of examples: readers react to each other's blogs, they tag their profiles, invite others to interest groups, criticize photos, hit on one another, and so forth. Each 'intrusion' prompts a user to react and reassess her profile, by implication – since expression affects content – altering her identity. In addition to that, readers in hypertext have the option of following different reading paths. Once a classical story has been written, by contrast, the reading path is fixed: readers do not themselves rewrite autobiographies or novels. Only on Wikipedia they do.

Sherry Turkle describes this process of the online 'bricolage' of identities as follows:

> "On the Web, the idiom for constructing a 'home' identity is to assemble a 'home page' of virtual objects that correspond to one's interests. One constructs a home page by composing or 'pasting' on it words, images, and sounds, and by making connections between it and other sites in the Internet or the Web. Like the agents in emergent AI, one's identity emerges from whom one knows, one's associations and connections. People link their home page to pages about such things as music, paintings, television shows, cities, books, photographs, comic strips, and fashion models" (Turkle 1995: 258).

Although written in 1995, this description is still surprisingly accurate in the heydays of web 2.0. Because of the versatility and ease of composing a personal homepage or blog, users can play with virtual – often fictional – identities. A website is an empty form, so to say, which can be molded into many virtual – potential – identities, each of which can just as easily be reconsidered and recomposed. As I wrote in chapter 5, web 2.0 introduced a new feature by enabling its users to co-shape websites. Modern websites have some features that were unheard of in the beginning days of the world wide web: lots of sites are highly dynamic and constantly changing, some sites are never the same when you visit them. Due to the speed and flexibility of websites in

terms of changing content, online expressions of identity are always 'under construction' (Cf. Frissen & De Mul 2000: 43) For that reason, one might argue that websites are a better metaphore and are closer to real life identities in late modernity than narratives, since in real life too, identities are never completely fixed and always open to revision.

7.2 Playful identities and the ludification of culture

Der Mensch ist nur da ganz Mensch, wo er spielt.
Friedrich Schiller

Overseeing the whole thesis, the three main insights it yielded are:

1. The three paradoxes of the late modern identity, as I analyzed them in chapter 3, prevail on the world wide web; indeed, they are reinforced by web practices.
2. For that reason, instead of seeing the web as a radical breach with history and seeing it as a medium that brought along a completely new way of dealing with identity, we had better acknowledge the fact that, despite some important transformations, web identities are in line with our pre-digital history.
3. As far as our identity has been transformed in the light of using the world wide web, a theory of playful identities does far more justice to online identity construction and identity expression than the theory of narrative identity does.

If we add up all the paradoxes we encountered during the research and place them in three main categories – as I did at the end of chapter 3, then we could summarize the process of identity formation in the present age of digital media as a continuous oscillation between the opposite poles of personal autonomy on the one hand, and technological, cultural and commercial determinism on the other hand; between individuality and collectivity; between the fixed and the flowing. In addition, two concomitant oppositions are particularly distinctive fot the web era, namely the tension between the local and the global, and between the real and the virtual. These last two paradoxes helped shaping the three classical paradoxes of identity into their current

form. Sherry Turkle emphasised these influences as she wrote: "We are encouraged to think of ourselves as fluid, emergent, decentralized, multiplicitous, flexible, and ever in process. […] The ability of the Internet to change popular understandings of identity is heightened by the presence of these metaphors" (Turkle 1995: 264).

As I made clear in part 1 of the thesis already, we should certainly not exaggerate the influence media – the web in particular – have on identities. Despite all the new features the web offers in terms of identity experiments and transformations, people still have a relatively stable sense of their identities. In fact, as Turkle's research showed, the web may be the perfect medium for identity experiments, but in the end this helps people in their search for their identities. The number of people portraying themselves as truthfully as possible greatly outnumbers the amount of people who purposely distort their self-images. It has been calculated, for example, that 80 percent of the Avatars in Second Life closely resemble their off-line creators. As Turkle showed for MUDs, a lot of users feel more 'authentic', that is, closer to who they really think they are online than in the off-line world. She writes that interviewees reportedly mentioned to feel more in tune with their identities online than in the real world (Turkle 1995: 185).

Clear limits exist in regard to identity experiments on the web. Not only do users not leave behind their real-life character, gender, ethnicity, and culture as they enter the world wide web; like any other medium, the web too is subjected to all sorts of cultural practices that pre-condition its users. Whatever believers may claim, no user can shed off her nationality, language, gender, etcetera. when going online. Even more so, as was shown in chapters 1 and 2, the bodily and ecological foundations of our identities prevent us from losing ourselves completely in web experiments. Again, talking of the 'playful probing' of identities, would be a better way to describe current web practices than the much stronger 'experiment'. In their research about online identities De Haan and colleagues also came to conclude that "Despite the fact that blogging or building an own homepage is a very popular activity, young people admit having built a personal page or homepage in the spur of the moment or because everyone else did so" (Hermes & Janssen 2006: 165; author's translation).

Multiple reasons appeared on the scene why a theory of playful identities suits web practices better than a theory of narrative identity. Let me summarize the argument in

favour of the theory of playful identities once more. First of all, play, because of its multi-facetted, mobile and ambivalent nature, is capable of doing justice to the typical features of web practices, including multimediality (5.2), virtuality (6.3), interactivity (7.1.), connectivity (6.2), hypertextuality (6.3), non-linearity (6.3), reflexivity (5.1), and flexibility (6.3). Second, we saw that humour plays a pivotal role in many web applications – on ecological websites, social network sites, but also news media –, which invites users to playfully behave and perceive. Playfulness expresses the co-existence of seriousness and frivolity that is constitutive of many usages of the web.

In the third place, because of its rich offering of tools for self-expression the web – more than traditional media do – puts people in a position to express their identities publically, and to take a critical, yet playful stance towards themselves. The feedback mechanisms built in the web encourage people to reflect on themselves without suffering the burdensome, grave off-line consequences, which come with publishing an autobiography or any other hard-copy document. Furthermore, the increased amount of information available, the acquaintance with exotic lifestyles, knowledge of different life practices; they all force people active one the web to added reflection on their own identities and life's course.

In the fourth place, the web entices people's creativity: as during play, it invites users to explore new paths and leave the known, pre-fabricated roads behind. Because of its playful nature the world wide web opens up a realm of possibilities – a *playroom* – which allows users to discover the new, the dangerous, maybe even brush the illegal, without immediately suffering severe 'off-line' consequences. The web allows to carry out all sorts of experiments with ideas and practices in a relatively 'safe', playful mode.

Fifth, the phenomenon of play slowly but decisively encroaches upon our culture, under the guise of, for example, entertainment games, serious games, role playing games, workshops, brainstorm sessions, adventure parcs, 3D movies, and so forth. We are living in an age in which our thoughts and actions are characterized by a 'ludic prefiguration'. Play has become an intrinsic part of the prevailing ideology in our 'experience economy'. This may seem an odd idea, far from our 'serious' reality with all its problems and weighty matters, but we only have to look at the field of economy, for instance, to see why this idea is not far fetched at all.

In *The age of access* (2001) Jeremy Rifkin puts forward the view of our current economy as one that is less about things and services, but increasingly about meaning, experiences, entertainment, symbols and, above all, *creativity*. In the nineteenth century the industrial revolution gave a boost to the economy of *things*. From the fifties onward, in the Western world this industrial economy transformed into an economy of *services*. Since the year 1990, Rifkin witnesses the development of an economy of the *production of meaning(s)*. For that reason, we should place any discussion about contemporaneous identity in the light of this overarching, cultural change from an economy of things to an economy of experiences. Rifkin writes:

> "The metamorfosis from industrial production to cultural capitalism is being accompanied by an equally significant shift from the work ethic to the play ethic. While the industrial era was characterized by the commodification of work, the Age of Access is about, above all else, the commodification of play – namely the marketing of cultural resources including rituals, the arts, festivals, social movements, spiritual and fraternal activity, and civic engagement in the form of paid-for personal entertainment. The struggle between the cultural sphere and the commercial sphere to control both access to and the content of play is one of the defining elements of the coming era" (Rifkin 2001: 7).

The music industry, the sports industry, the arts industry, to mention a few; they all proved his prediction right. In this sense, digital culture as such is becoming increasingly playful too. Living in conditions of late modernity increasingly gives the impression of life being *just a game*. Life sometimes equals a pendulum that goes back and forth between jobs, lifestyles and opinions. After the demise of a lot of traditional institutions, the disappereance of religion from the lives of many and the break down of family life in affluent countries, the concept of *play* expresses the search for identity of late modern *homo zappens* (De Mul 2010) to the point.

In the sixth place, all identity bears an element of artificiality. Identities always are temporary compositions, marked by an attempt to create a relatively fixed beaken of comfort and recognition in an ever-fleeting world. The concept of playfulness captures this artificiality thanks to its intrinsic quality of creating a world of its own, a world that

both is, and is not, forming a hybrid of being and appearance. Playing we are allowed to enter the 'magic circle' (Huizinga), to step outside the realm of the ordinary. We enter a world of pleasure, fun and intense experiences, which creates its own – new – playing field, beyond the mundane opposition of reality and appearance. Paradoxical about play itself, is that precisely the boundary between what is real and what is play diffuses: as one plays with vigor, it becomes difficult to tell play and 'normal' reality apart. Particular of the web is the disappearance of these boundaries – as I demonstrated in section 6.2, in which social network sites served as an example of spaces for being together virtually.

In the seventh, and final place, playfulness accurately describes how the three paradoxes of identity, as they underly our current self-conceptions in the Western world, were transformed under the influence of the web, by emphasizing the as-if character of late modern identities, the non-seriousness and frivolity, which are trade marks of web-based behaviour. By acting playfully online the identity paradoxes, as laid bare in the third chapter, are deepened. Not only does the concept of play catch the ambivalent nature of the late modern identity better than the concept of a story does; it accounts for the process of ludification as it has actually been furthered by online practices. In fact, as was explained in chapter 4, playfulness is *the* criterium of play. Being playful means performing actions in such a way that there always is a high degree of ambivalence involved: for one it is only play and people recognise it as such, but somehow there is always an element of seriousness involved, either within or standing behind playful conduct. Playfulness is the expression of the ambivalence between seriousness and non-seriousness that is constitutive of all playing, and it is increasingly constitutive for how we go about our business.

For all those reasons, the theory of playful identity provides us with a better toolkit to understand today's identity than the less versatile theory of narrative identity does. Although the listed features of web 2.0 do surely not obliterate the theory of narrative identity construction, they do urge us to reassess its effectiveness and exhaustiveness in terms of describing the present expression and formation of identities. In the *prelude* I put forward the question whether the theory of narrative identity was tenable in the light of recent web developments? Looking back at this research, I can now say that it still *is* tenable, *but*, only as part of a new, larger theory of playful identities, a theory that captures aspects of current identities that are non-comprehensible within the

framework of narrative identity formation. In return to the Hegelian logic I deployed in the early stages of this research, the theory of narrative identity could be said to be 'Aufgehoben', that is, it has not simply been surpassed by the theory of playful identity, but it is preserved in it, and as such it contributes to reaching a higher level of understanding reality. Therefore, in order to fully grasp current, web-related identities, we have no choice but to expand the theory of narrative identity towards a theory of *playful identities*.

Afterplay

By setting foot on this planet, each of us is thrown into the big *play*, the rules of which we have not been allowed to choose. In this world, human actions are no events we can determine freely, but we always have to steer a middle course between the play's rules and the *playroom* in which human freedom resides. For as long as extra-terrestrial journeys to other live-sustaining planets remain confined to science fiction movies, this earthly stage will be beginning and end, past and future, fate and hope of the play of life as it unfolds. The boundaries of this playing field constitute the limits, within which seven billion tragicomedies are performed. Therefore, to all of us, the most important question in life is: 'wanna play'?

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Dutch summary

(Nederlandse samenvatting)

Het doel van deze studie is te onderzoeken in hoeverre de theorie van de narratieve identiteit, zoals die door onder andere de Franse filosoof Paul Ricoeur is gepropageerd, houdbaar is in ons tijdperk van steeds verdere digitalisering van de samenleving - met name de opkomst en vergaande verspreiding van het world wide web. Webtoepassingen als Facebook, Twitter, Google, Hyves and LinkedIn bijvoorbeeld zijn niet meer weg te denken uit het moderne bestaan. Welke implicaties heeft dit voor onze identiteit? Meer in het bijzonder: kunnen we de vorming en expressie van identiteiten nog wel zien als een proces waarin het narratief – het verhaal – het vormgevende en bepalende principe is? De titel van deze studie verraadt het antwoord op deze vraag al: we hebben aan de theorie van de narratieve identiteit niet langer voldoende om adequaat te beschrijven hoe identiteiten in ons tijdsgewricht tot stand komen. Ik doe in deze dissertatie dan ook het voorstel de theorie van de narratieve identiteitsformatie uit te breiden tot een theorie van *speelse* (=*ludische*) identiteiten.

Bezijdens het feitelijke oprukken van het spelelement in onze cultuur – denk aan de zogenaamde vermaakscultuur waarin sport, spel, ontspanning, vertier en avontuurlijke ervaringen een steeds grotere (zingevende) rol spelen – valt er veel te zeggen voor een meer impliciete 'ludificatie' van het identiteitsproces. Daar waar het klassieke verhaal, waarop de narratieve identiteitstheorie is gebaseerd, uitgaat van een logica die wordt gekenmerkt door eigenschappen als monolineariteit, afsluiting en sequentialiteit, is deze logica maar moeilijk te rijmen met een wereld waarin mensen dankzij webmedia virtueel omnipresent zijn, multitasken, continue in netwerken opereren, door flexibiliteit getekend worden en deel uitmaken van een constant veranderende, in wederzijdse afhankelijkheid verkerende wereldsamenleving. Anno 2010 betekent het hebben en ontwikkelen van een identiteit een voortdurende bevraging door een persoon van zichzelf. Wie ben ik? Waar wil ik heen met mijn leven? Hoe zien de mij omringende mensen mij? Tel ik nog wel mee zonder Iphone? Kom ik zonder LinkedIn nog wel aan een baan? Hoe en in welke sociale netwerken wil ik mij positioneren?

Het spreken over identiteit is gemeengoed geworden. Werd een jongen vroeger slager omdat zijn vader het was, was een Marokkaan vroeger interessant omdat hij uit een ander land kwam, zo moet diezelfde slagerszoon vandaag op het MBO uit honderden opleidingen kiezen op grond van *wie hij is*, en worden Marokkaanse jongeren op basis van hun etnische identiteit alleen al gerekend tot de risicogroepen. Religieuze identiteiten leiden in extreme gevallen tot daden van terrorisme; onze levensstijl pleegt een welhaast onhoudbare aanslag op de leefomgeving; onze voetbalsupporters gebruiken hun mobiele telefoons om rellen te regisseren. Journaaluitzendingen springen even gemakkelijk van een item over online identiteitsdiefstal, naar een item over integratieproblematiek, als naar een item over homo-emancipatie. Al deze zaken betreffen de menselijke identiteit: de persoonlijke identiteit die we gebruiken om mensen te herkennen, groepsidentiteiten als onderdeel van een proces van culturele identificatie, en identiteit als verzet tegen verouderde zienswijzen en discriminatie.

Hoewel het onmogelijk is alle aspecten die aan het identiteitsvraagstuk kleven in één proefschrift recht te doen, heb ik in het eerste deel van het werk gepoogd de problematiek in zijn breedte uiteen te zetten. Het boek is opgezet volgens een logica die een filosoof *Hegeliaans* zou kunnen noemen: beginnend met een vrij abstracte analyse van het fenomeen identiteit in hoofdstuk 1, daal ik stapje voor stapje af naar de concrete invulling die mensen aan hun identiteiten hebben gegeven om uiteindelijk in het tweede deel bij een bespreking van webidentiteiten te eindigen. Het mag dan ook niet verwonderen dat we hier een kwestie bespreken die de sporen van grote filosofen uit het verleden in zich draagt. Theorieën van zo uiteenlopende wijsgeren als Aristoteles, Descartes, Locke en Kant zullen in het eerste hoofdstuk de revue passeren om de zaken helder te krijgen. Hun gedachtegoed vormt de conceptuele basis waarop het huidige debat over identiteit is gebouwd. Ik besteed aandacht aan begrippen die een belangrijke rol spelen in het identiteitsvraagstuk zoals subjectiviteit, zelfheid, narrativiteit, de verhouding tussen lichaam en geest, geheugen, karakter en ecologisch zelfbewustzijn. Deze analyse heeft uiteindelijk geleid tot een definitie van persoonlijke identiteit als *het reflexieve, symbolische zelfverstaan van een persoon, waarmee zij zowel haar gelijkheid in tijd als de haar onderscheidende merkmalen uitdrukt, als waarmede zij uitdrukking geeft aan haar morele oriëntatie in het leven*. Betreffende die morele oriëntatie – wat ik de 'inhoud' van identiteiten noem - kom ik in hoofdstuk 3 tot

de conclusie dat historisch een drietal paradoxen zijn gegroeid en aldus kenmerkend zijn geworden voor de huidige, laatmoderne identiteit.

De eerste van deze paradoxen is wat ik heb genoemd de paradox van *autonomie* versus *heteronomie*: de spanning tussen een denken over de mens in termen van vrij en zelfbeschikkend, en het voortschrijdende inzicht in sociale, psychologische, commerciële en technologische processen die onze autonomie inperken. De tweede paradox heb ik die van *individualiteit* versus *collectiviteit* genoemd, waarmee ik refereer aan het op het oog tegenstrijdige verschijnsel van een leven gericht op hyperindividuele ontplooiing enerzijds, en de steeds groter wordende sociale druk tot gemeenschaps- en netwerkvorming anderzijds. De derde paradox tenslotte bestaat in de tegenoverstelling van het idee dat we een vaste, stabiele identititeit hebben – iets dat op een dagelijks niveau van wederzijdse herkenning moeilijk ontkend kan worden – en het contrasterende idee van de veranderlijkheid van identiteiten en het primaat van (sociale en technologische) omgevingen in onze identiteit. Een inzicht dat ons noodzaakt het idee van een 'kernidentiteit' los te laten.

Het tweede deel van het proefschrift probeert te laten zien hoe bovenstaande paradoxen onder invloed van het gebruik van het *world wide web* versterkt worden en uitnodigen tot de introductie van het concept van 'speelsheid' ter beschrijving van de dienovereenkomsitge identiteitsconstructie. Deze 'speelsheid' van identiteiten kan op een viertal – uit het begrip van wat een spel is voorvloeiende – manieren worden uitgelegd. Ten eerste zijn identiteiten speels voor zover ze ontstaan in het spanningsveld tussen sociale, technologische en commerciële bepaling enerzijds ('regelgebonden spel'), en de creatief-autonome toe-eigening van media anderzijds (vrij spel). Ten tweede drukt het spelen de spanning tussen individuele en collectieve gedragen en belangen uit zoals dit aan elk (traditioneel) spelen eigen is, waarin het zowel om samenspel als om individuele excellentie gaat. In de derde plaats duidt speelsheid op het 'spelen' en 'experimeneren' met de werkelijkheid zoals online toepassingen dit steeds meer mogelijk maken en zij daardoor gebruikers de mogelijkheid geven meerdere identiteiten te testen. In de vierde en laatste plaats wijst de speelsheid van identiteiten op het voorlopige, vrijblijvende karakter van identiteiten zoals ze op het web veelal beleefd worden: het gegeven dat webpraktijken met veel humor en frivoliteit gepaard gaan en zij de ernst van het dagelijkse, serieuze leven

tijdelijk opheffen. In de breed uitgemeten studie naar ecologische weblogs in hoofdstuk 5 laat ik zien hoe al deze elementen van speelsheid in een online praktijk samenkomen.

Kort samengevat laat ik daar zien dat *interactiviteit* in het digitale tijdperk betekent dat we in toenemende mate in staat worden gesteld te spelen met het medium dat we gebruiken en dat we ons dit medium in hoge mate voor zelfbepaalde doeleinden eigen kunnen maken. Dit vormt mijns insziens een cruciaal verschil met traditionele media als boeken en televisieprogramma's, die een geslotener karakter hebben en zich veel minder lenen voor actieve gebruikersparticipatie. Ook het niet-serieuze, humoristische karakter van veel websites, het gegeven dat ze ons in staat stellen te doen 'als of', maakt van het web een bakermat voor het uiten van kritiek en subversieve meningen en het experimenteren met innovatie ideeën. Spelenderwijs wordt in veel weblogs, door de mogelijkheden die ze bieden een vrije ruimte – een *speelruimte* – geopend voor creatieve en interactieve participatie.

In de daaropvolgende hoofdstukken worden verscheidene aspecten van webgebruik besproken die de geschetste ontwikkeling van narrativiteit naar speelsheid verder onderstrepen. Er wordt gewezen op de ontwikkeling van het web naar web 2.0; de hypertekstualiteit van het web en het daarmee samenhangende fenomeen van de multilineariteit; de constructie van webidentiteiten als een *collage* in plaats van een verhaal; het gefragmenteerde karakter van webidentiteiten; de onafgeslotenheid en voorlopigheid van het medium in combinatie met toegenomen gebruiksflexibiliteit; de virtualiteit, multimedialiteit en connectiviteit van het web; en het reflexieve karakter van het web. Daarbij heb ik aangetoond hoe speelsheid – in de zin van humoristische, niet-ernstige benadering van de zaken, als waren ze slechts een spel – een onderliggende constante is bij het gebruik van veel hedendaagse webtoepassingen. Kenmerkend voor een speelse omgang met de dingen is nu dat juist achter deze speelsheid altijd – zoals Johan Huizinga al schreef – de ernst staat. Het begrip van de *speelse identiteiten* drukt treffend deze co-existentie van seriositeit en frivoliteit uit, die zo kenmerkend is voor hoe we met het web omgaan. In het zesde hoofdstuk laat ik deze vorm van speelsheid in praktijk zien aan de hand van een bespreking van de sociale netwerkpagina Facebook.

Het hele onderzoek overziend zijn de drie belangrijkste inzichten die het heeft opgeleverd de volgende. In de eerste plaats is duidelijk geworden dat de drie kenmerkende paradoxen van de laatmoderne identiteit, zoals ik deze in het eerste deel

uiteen heb gezet, door webpraktijken versterkt worden. Daarom kunnen we, in de tweede plaats, vaststellen dat het accurater is de komst van het web in onze levens te beschouwen als een voortzetting en intensivering van ontwikkelingen uit ons pre-digitale verleden, in plaats van het web en zijn implicaties te beschouwen als een radicale breuk met het verleden en onze omgang met media. In de derde plaats heb ik vastgesteld dat voor zover menselijke identiteiten zijn veranderd in het licht van het gebruik van het world wide web, een theorie van de speelse identiteiten meer recht doet aan de huidige constructie en uitdrukking van identiteiten dan de theorie van de narratieve identiteit dat doet.

Het denken over identiteit in termen van speelsheid drukt treffend uit hoe de drie geschetste paradoxen van de identiteit onder de invloed van webgebruik zijn getransformeerd. Een theorie van de *ludische* identiteit benadrukt het 'als of', het onserieuze en frivole karakter, maar tegelijkertijd ook de verheven ernst die kenmerkend zijn voor online uitingen van identiteit en het proces van identiteitsconstructie voor zover dat door webpraktijken wordt geschraagd. Hoewel een theorie van de speelse identiteit de theorie van de narratieve identiteit zeker niet overbodig maakt, dwingt het web ons door zijn mediumspecifieke kenmerken deze theorie op zijn minst te heroverwegen. Willen we goed begrijpen en beschrijven hoe menselijke identiteiten heden ten dage tot stand komen, dan kunnen we mijns inziens niet anders dan de theorie van de narratieve identiteit uitbreiden tot een theorie van de ludische identiteit.

Curriculum Vitae

After obtaining his Gymnasium B diploma in 1996, Jeroen (1978) moved to Rotterdam to embark on his studies at the department of Economy at the *Erasmus University Rotterdam*. In his quest for the deeper meaning of life, he switched to the department of Philosophy in his second year of studies. In addition to philosophy he took several minors in the humanities at the universities of Leiden, Utrecht and Torino. Although he still had not found the meaning of life, in 2003 he successfully defended his Master thesis on the concept of play in the works of German philosophers Nietzsche, Kant and Schiller. In 2005 he was appointed as a PhD student in the *Playful Identities* project to investigate the implications of web use for human identity. Jeroen currently works as a management trainee for *Het Expertise Centrum* in The Hague and he is studying again, this time for a Master's degree in *Public Information Management*. Next to his daytime job he is a member of the local council for the Green Party.

Play is not only part of his professional life: as son of a sports teacher and a former top handball player, he is a close follower of professional sports competitions and did numerous sports himself, including tennis, volleyball, basketball, squash, skiing and running. His biggest passion, though, remains cycling. That is why he spends most of his spare hours on his racing bike or in the gym. Jeroen lives with his girlfriend in Rotterdam.

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