



Image by Midjourney, from the prompt: “artificial intelligence, robot painting, style of the future, creative”.

Technologies that change our sense of self

Zorg Allport

New technologies offer new ways of understanding our identity. Aaron Sloman's thought-provoking book, “[The Computer Revolution in Philosophy: Philosophy, science and models of mind](#)”, points out that our current understanding of ourselves is expressed in terms of metaphors derived from our society's current technologies.

For example, many people now understand how Artificial Intelligences are constructed. On the one hand, many different types of physical hardware can run “the same” program, even though there may be multiple copies on different machines. But these copies of the program may become “different”, by interacting with the world, storing memories and learning.

At any point in time, one of these AI programs could be “paused”. Its source code and accumulated experience data could be serialized, and then transmitted via radio waves to a different physical machine on another planet. The new machine might be physically different from the original, but running a virtual machine that simulates the original computer hardware and operating system. The program could then be restarted there, centuries or millennia later.

Metaphors for thinking

Thus the emergence of Artificial Intelligence gives us a metaphor for thinking about the Buddhist concept of 'reincarnation'. Even in the absence of an individual eternal soul, there may be connections between an intelligence in one time and place, and multiple copies of “the same, but different” intelligence functioning in later times and places. This astonishing idea

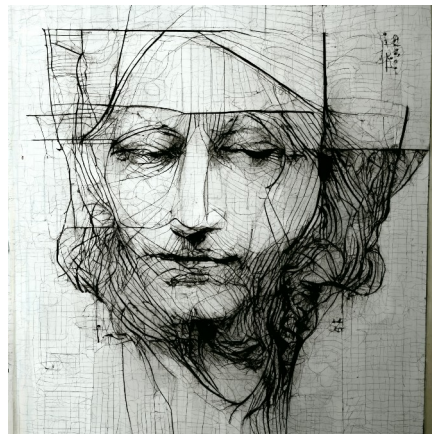
can help us to rethink our notions of both human intelligence and human identity.

According to Buddhist metaphysics, there is no individual eternal soul, but the actions of individuals are important. For example, what is most important about Shakespeare in the 21st Century, is not who he was as an individual, but the power of his body of work in writing and plays. Shakespeare is certainly not an Artificial Intelligence, but we could identify his role in contemporary culture as that of an “Anonymous Intelligence”. His anonymity consists in the fact that, under any name, his work (sonnets and plays) would endure for humanity and be just as good.

New challenges

New Artificial Intelligence programs are challenging our ideas of human intelligence and identity in other ways. The AI program Midjourney produced the image at the top of this article, starting from the prompt “*artificial intelligence, robot painting, style of the future, creative*”. Just as Buddhism says “there is no actor, but there are actions” from a metaphysical point of view, we can say of Midjourney that “there is no painter, but there are paintings”.

On the other hand, if we explicitly ask an Artificial Intelligence to emulate a historical human's works, it may produce an extraordinary number of derivative variations based upon its having learned from the original artist's work. For example, the strong suggestion of the face of the Mona Lisa is apparent in the image below, but other things are new, when Midjourney is prompted to respond to a random number in a specific historical style: “*645,987,341, in the style of leonardo da vinci, pen and ink line drawing*”:



In some cases, human-developed technologies can literally allow us to see ourselves in a different way. Philippe Rocat describes¹ how children interact with mirrors, in five developmental stages of self-awareness:

- (1) That's a mirror;
- (2) there's a person in it;
- (3) that person is me (basic self-awareness);
- (4) that person is going to be me forever (object permanence);
- (5) everyone else can see it (self-consciousness).

1 “Five levels of self-awareness as they unfold in early life”, *Consciousness and Cognition*, 2003.

In this fifth stage, the self is now recognized not only from a first person's perspective, but also from a third person's. This objectivity about ourselves, as we appear in a particular moment, may be said to depend upon the experience provided by the technology of a mirror.

But a mirror image is only a reflection of ourselves in a particular moment. Smartphone videos now give us a new tool for experiencing ourselves even more objectively. When we record a video of ourselves, we can view ourselves objectively from a different time; we can hear how our voice sounds to others (without simultaneously hearing our voice through our own bone structures); and see our faces as other people see them, even from the side or behind, not in a reversed mirror image.

The widespread availability of smartphones, and the increasing immersion of our social lives into our online lives, is bringing about a new sense of identity for the next generation. We might describe this as a sixth stage in the development of self-awareness, in which the self is recognized as both subject and object in the same video.

However, this technology-driven de-coupling of our sense of self, from our immediate experience of the present, has brought changes in the way we interact with each other socially. There is a disconnection from immediate face-to-face synchronous interactions with other people in our presence, and an increase in the permanence of non-synchronous interactions, with unknown numbers of unknown people who are not in our presence.

We have become familiar with the negative aspects of this loosening of our connection to ourselves and others in the present moment. As technologies are transforming the human experience of childhood and adolescence, it is becoming increasingly difficult for each generation to learn from the very different childhood experiences of the previous generation.

However, new tools which transform our sense of identity can also be used in new forms of self-education. There is an ancient form of Buddhist meditation called “MettaBhavana”, or “the development of loving kindness”. That practice involves wishing benefits first for oneself, then family and friends, then neutral people, and finally all beings. When we pray for health, happiness, love, and wisdom, our intention is to create more of these things, which are essentially unlimited resources, to be shared by all.

So it is now possible for a teenager to make a video, saying things like “*may you be healthy...*”, knowing that the “you” being addressed means “the audience of this video”, which is the same universal “you” that is addressed in the MettaBhavana practice. It is a way to address one's own future selves, as well as family, friends, and potentially “all beings”.

It is also possible to directly learn from watching videos that we made before, and to notice the difference between the “self” which made the video, the many “selves” that we believed we might become when we made the video, and the “self” which is now watching it. We can iteratively refine our idea about what it is that we might want, not only for our future selves, but also for the future selves of all beings.

As Facebook approaches 3 billion users, it will soon be technically possible for anyone to create a message that can be received by the majority of all human beings, both present and future. This raises the question: what is the best thing to say in such a message? My personal answer is in the form of music for four Buddhist blessings, for health, happiness, love, and wisdom (see [this Spotify playlist](#) and [this YouTube video](#)).

You can now send a message to your future selves and to the world. What will you say?