

Feuerbach's Alienation and Cyberspace (Social Media):
Three Models of the Human

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I. INTRODUCTION

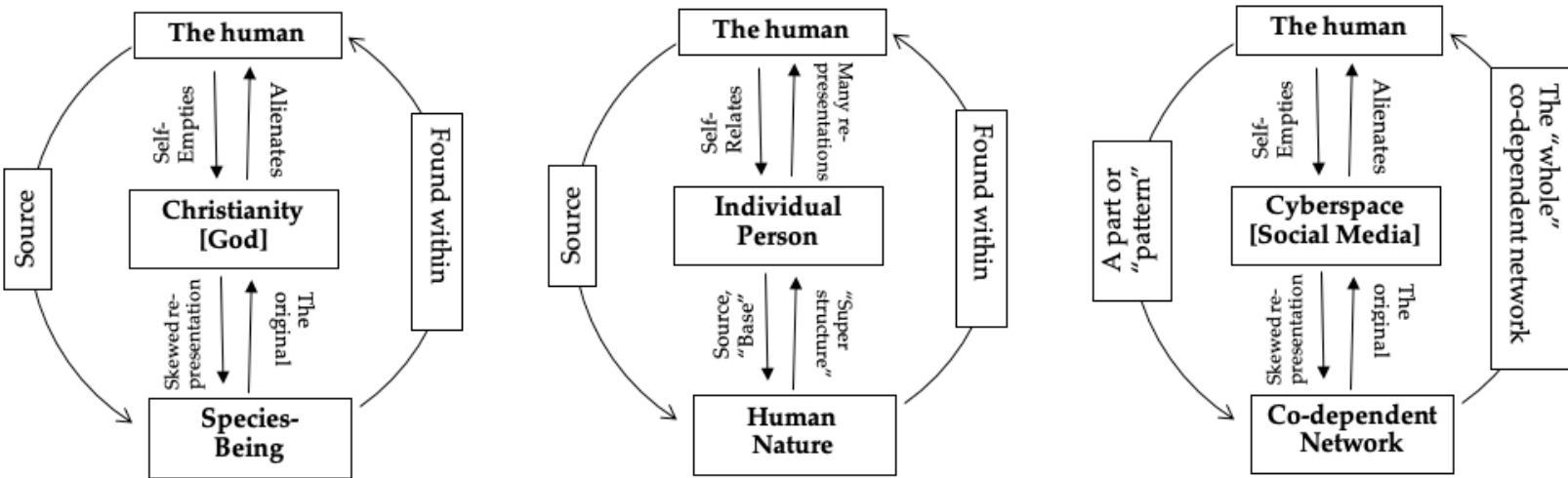
For the longest time, philosophers have searched for the “essence” of human beings. A metonym for the “self” of the human, this “essence” oftentimes explains what marks the human a distinct ontological being apart from other entities, the core which makes the human *a human being*. In order to grasp this “essence,” human beings apply different concepts by which they observe and translate human “essence.” I call such concepts “models of the human.” One of the models of the human, the *autonomous individual*, has been the ruling paradigm since the Enlightenment and Romantic period. Through active analyses of the human—physical, mental, political, social, and more—the individual person “I” has been the main focus of observation. However, with the onset of modern technology that obfuscates boundaries and categorizations—such as cyberspace and social media—the model of the human is shifting to the *co-dependent network*. Currently, we are between these two paradigms. While such a paradigm shift may seem harrowing, a similar change had occurred before, from the *dependent creature* of classical theism, which may be the oldest model of the human.

Looking at the three models of the human and their intermediaries to access the human self and essence (Feuerbach’s conception of God, individual person, cyberspace (social media)), I find surprising similarities in Feuerbach’s conception of God with cyberspace (social media). Specifically, I discover that they share the process of *alienation* with the human, but differ in their perspectives on the characteristics of human essence. In other words, as the *dependent creature* under God and the *co-dependent network* under cyberspace (social media), the human experiences the same *alienation* which leads to contingent personhood; however, this *alienation* functions under two different biases, one which regards human essence as “universal, unchanging,

and independently originating,” the other which regards human essence as “resulting from complex inter-relations that cause elements to *dependently originate* from each other.”

With this in mind, the paper observes the paradigm shift— the downfall of the *autonomous individual* and the emergence of the *co-dependent network*— under cyberspace (social media) by borrowing the lens of Feuerbach’s conception of God and the *dependent creature*. In order to accomplish this task, I organize my argument thus. First, I invite Feuerbach’s conception of God in *The Essence of Christianity* to examine the *dependent creature*. In doing so, I examine the process of alienation, and offer human essence as “universal, unchanging, and independently originating.” Second, I invite the Buddhist notion of dependent origination and Taylor’s concept of the schemata based on information theory to examine the *co-dependent network*. In doing so, I introduce the human essence as “resulting from complex inter-relations that cause elements to *dependently originate* from each other.” Third, I define cyberspace and one form of cyberspace, social media. Fourth, I compare cyberspace (social media) to Feuerbach’s conception of God to draw out background characteristics that work to facilitate the implosion of the *autonomous individual*. Fifth, I observe alienation in cyberspace (social media) through the two perspectives on human essence, one under the *autonomous individual*, and the other under the *co-dependent network*, to illustrate the eventual implosion of the *autonomous individual*. Sixth, I analyze the implications of this implosion by introducing autonomous and contingent personhood. And finally, I conclude the paper with anecdotal observations of how Zoom acts as the “anti” social media during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Before diving into the paper, I want to insert a quick explanation about the graph. There are two major commonalities that exist between the three models of the human. The first is between the *dependent creature* and the *co-dependent network*. Both of their intermediaries—Feuerbach’s conception of God and cyberspace (social media), lead the human to experience a process of alienation, which leads to contingent personhood. This leaves the *autonomous individual* at the opposite end of the spectrum, wherein it manifests as autonomous personhood. The second is between the *dependent creature* and the *autonomous individual* in their shared perspective of human essence as “universal, unchanging, and independently originating.” This leaves the *co-dependent network* with a different perspective of human essence as “resulting from complex inter-relations that cause elements to *dependently originate* from each other.”



The Dependent Creature

- Contingent personhood
- Human essence as unchanging, universal and independently originating
- As the *dependent creature*, through Christianity (more specifically God), the human accesses one's essence (species-being).

The Autonomous Individual

- Autonomous personhood
- Human essence as unchanging, universal and independently originating
- As the *autonomous individual*, through the individual person, the human accesses one's essence (which, for the lack of a better word, is described as "human nature")

The Co-dependent Network

- Contingent personhood
- Human essence as complex inter-relations that cause elements to *dependently originate* from each other
- As part of the *co-dependent network*, through cyberspace (more specifically social media), the human accesses one's essence (co-dependent network)

- Graph represents the process by which the human accesses one's essence
- Straight arrows in the middle represent the process of personhood (autonomous or contingent)
- Curved arrows on the side represent the relationship between the model of the human and human essence (unchanging, universal and independently originating *or* complex inter-relations that cause elements to *dependently originate* from each other)
- The bottom boxes— "species-being," "human nature," "co-dependent network"—are different names for human essence

II. THE HUMAN, THE DEPENDENT CREATURE, AND GOD

In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach asserts that the presence of God alienates the human from one's essence: "Religion is the disuniting of man from himself [...] a differencing of man with his own nature."¹ This section observes how Feuerbach reaches this conclusion through four key distinctions: species and individual, subject and object, consciousness, and predicates. While Feuerbach uses these terms very liberally and seldom provides clear definitions for any of the terms, this section loosely outlines his thoughts in order to understand how the *dependent creature* manifests through the relationship between the human and God in a four-step process: 1. The human empties one's self and essence into the figure "God" 2. The human idealizes "God" as a distinct entity 3. By rendering human essence as *ideal, autonomous*, and *outside* the human's reach, "God" becomes a presence that alienates the human from one's self and essence 4. The human starts to rely on "God" to access one's sense of self and essence.

First, Feuerbach makes a distinction in ontological scope between species and the individual when he states "individuality is the self-conditioning, the self-limitation of the species."² For the human, "species" refers to general humanity, whereas "individual" refers to a singular human being. While the human possesses characteristics of the individual within oneself, one has "the yearning to be free from himself, i.e., from the limits and defects of his individuality, [which in turn is reflected in] the longing after the perfect type of his nature,"³ known as the species-essence, or the nature of general

¹ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (London: Trübner & Co, 1881), 33.

² *Ibid.*, 281.

³ *Ibid.*, 281.

humanity. This is what Feuerbach expresses in stating that “the inner life of man is the life which has relation to his species, to his *general*, as distinguished from his individual, nature.”⁴ Essence of the species, or *human nature*, is freed from the imperfections of individuality; for Feuerbach, species-essence represents the highest virtues that the human can possess.

Second, Feuerbach makes a distinction in ontological status between subject and object. Stating that “man is himself at once I and thou,”⁵ he notes the human’s ability to internally situate oneself both as a subject and an object. According to Feuerbach, to exist is to be a subject; to be contemplated and revered as another, distinct being is to be an object. Here, he makes seemingly contradictory claims. One, the human is nothing without an object. Two, the human affirms no objects without first affirming one’s self, the subject. Such claims raise the chicken-or-egg question: Which comes first, the subject or the object? Feuerbach states that when the human is conscious of an object, *at the same time*, one is also conscious of one’s subject. Within this dichotomous world of subject-object, it is only by the contemplated object that the human becomes acquainted with oneself, and vice versa. To be aware of one’s subject, the person must encounter objects; to encounter one’s surrounding objects, the human must be aware of one’s subject. In terms of temporality, the subject-object relation happens simultaneously.

Third, Feuerbach states that consciousness only exists for those who can hold one’s species as an object of thought, i.e. human beings. And since consciousness is an activity in which the *individual subject* is hosting the idea of the *general species*, the

⁴ Ibid., 2.

⁵ Ibid., 2.

human is thinking from the perspectives of both the individual and the species. Ergo, consciousness inherently implies self-consciousness, since consciousness requires that the human view oneself as the subject “I” and as an object of the general species “Thou.”

Fourth, through self-consciousness, as a subject “I” encountering other “subjects” in the world, the human becomes aware that “I” share certain predicates with other subjects. Predicates refer to specific characteristics of species-essence, e.g. love, wisdom, justice, and other perfect qualities that define human nature. *Here, the implicit premise is that such predicates are universal, unchanging, and independently originating concepts.* The predicate “love,” for example, is “universal” (widespread among the human beings), “unchanging” (a constant quality), and “independently originating” (exists as a distinct predicate separate from other predicates). The subject “I” possesses these certain attributes of human nature, or predicates, which vary among each individual: “The human nature,” asserts Feuerbach, “presents an infinite abundance of different predicates, and for that very reason it presents an infinite abundance of different individuals.”⁶

Having looked at the conditions of the human, Feuerbach turns to religion and makes a logical jump, equating religion with consciousness. Only found in human beings, religion and consciousness both distinguish humans from animals. But herein lies the big problem:

Man—this is the mystery of religion—projects his being into objectivity, and then again makes himself an object to this projected image of himself thus converted into a subject; he thinks of himself as an object to himself.⁷

⁶ Ibid., 23.

⁷ Ibid., 29 – 30.

This objectification occurs in several steps. First, yearning to be free from oneself, the human alienates one's predicates from oneself and individual limitations, viewing them from the perspective of the species ("projecting one's being into objectivity"). Second, alienating one's individual self from such predicates, the humans bestow and cluster their predicates to an ideal figure of God ("projected image of oneself"), who is a being with "an infinite fulness of various predicates": "each new man is a new predicate, [and] as many as are the men, so many are the powers, the properties of humanity"⁸ that are bestowed onto God. This process occurs because without such predicates, in the human's eye, God would be a defective being; a defective divine being would be preposterous. Third, in turn, God becomes a force of His own ("thus converted into a subject").

Now taking on life as a subjective being, God deprives the human from one's predicates via God's perfect and ideal presence. Since there is no necessity of positing the same thing twice, and God is a higher and more complete being than the human, under God's presence, the human withdraws one's predicates from oneself and invests them only in God. Here, it is important to note that this alienation from predicates implies an alienation from one's self. As Feuerbach states,

What the subject is lies only in the predicate; [...] The negation of the predicates is therefore the negation of the subject. What remains of the human subject when abstracted from the human attributes?⁹

The predicates compose one's *personality*, or personhood: "Man gives up his *personality*; but in return, God, the Almighty, infinite, unlimited being, is a person."¹⁰

⁸ Ibid., 23.

⁹ Ibid., 19.

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

Piling upon predicate on predicate, human essence on essence, personality on personality, God becomes a “person” via myriad individuals. The divine subject composed of predicates, God exists through the human.

For a more specific example, Feuerbach focuses on the predicate of “love,” which signifies the unity of the species; it is through the feeling of love that “I” recognize the other subjects around “myself,” and how other subjects recognize “me.” This is why “a loving heart is the heart of the species throbbing in the individual,”¹¹ for love makes the human recognize the other also as human. This is also why love is known as “the subjective *reality* of the species,” for it is only through love that the subject “I” *realizes* other beings as human, and vice versa. Like other predicates, because the human believes love to be perfect, absolute and divine, one transfers the quality onto God; In turn, the predicate “love” is assigned to God: “God is love.”¹²

During this process, the human is alienated from love and its qualities. Instead of embracing such attribute as an innate characteristic of the individual and species, the human alienates the predicate “love” as a characteristic external to oneself and transfers it onto God. Now, God not only possesses the predicate “love” and its qualities, but also replaces what role “love” had for the human. The human recognizes another as human not because of the feeling of love, but because of God. One only loves another for God’s sake, not for the sake of the human. In turn, Christianity reduces a general concept into a particular one. Within Christianity, one does not love another because they are a member of the same species; one loves another because God loves and acknowledges them as Christian. Feuerbach states,

¹¹ Ibid., 269.

¹² Ibid., 52.

A love which is based on [Jesus Christ] is a particular, exclusive love, which extends only so far as the acknowledgement of this person extends, a love which does not rest on the proper ground of love. Are we to love each other because Christ loved us? Such love would be an affected, imitative love.¹³

Feuerbach goes so far as to quote the Bible to emphasize this “particular, exclusive love,” stating that for the religious human, “to love the man who does not believe in Christ, is a sin against Christ, is to love the enemy of Christ.”¹⁴ Using this argument, he extrapolates that Christians must love *only other* Christians, and others only as potential Christians. Whereas “love to man as man” is a natural love, “love to man as Christian” is a love alienated from the human. Alienated from love, the human knows not how to love another human for the sake of the human; instead, they love the other for God’s sake.

This is the process by which God acts to alienate the human from their predicates, human nature, essence, and self. The human, projecting one’s being into objectivity, gives up the objectified “human nature and essence,” or the predicates, to God who grows more and more proportional to the human’s loss: “To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing”¹⁵ For the sake of God, the human must be impoverished. This process, otherwise stated, defines God as the following:

The divine being is nothing else than the human, or, rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective — i.e., contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being.¹⁶

For Feuerbach, religion is the *most rudimentary form* of human self-consciousness and species-consciousness, but one in which the individual-species distinction is

¹³ Ibid., 266.

¹⁴ Ibid., 253.

¹⁵ Ibid., 25.

¹⁶ Ibid., 14.

misconstrued as an individual-God distinction. By attributing human nature to a distinct being, human beings pervert the appropriate conceptualization of human essence—which should be *to the species-being*—to God.

Looking at Feuerbach's conception of religion and God, the human is alienated from one's essence— *species-being*— through a four-step process. First, the human *empties one's essence*, which composes the essential parts of one's self, into the separate figure "God." Second, during this process, the human *idealizes the entity* "God." Third, "God"— now separate, autonomous, and ideal— *alienates the human from one's self and essence* through its presence. Fourth, the human, now alienated from one's self and essence, *relies on this skewed re-presentation of human essence*, "God" in order to access one's self and essence. Here, the premise is of human essence as "universal, unchanging, and independently originating." Surprisingly, we find a similar process of alienation happening within cyberspace (social media).

III. THE HUMAN, THE CO-DEPENDENT NETWORK, AND CYBERSPACE (SOCIAL MEDIA)

Once upon a time in Greece, there lived a king named Erysichton, cursed with insatiable hunger. The more he ate, the hungrier he got. He ate and ate until finally he devoured himself, leaving nothing behind but his mouth and teeth. Consuming media upon media in cyberspace, we consume vast amounts of media until we consume ourselves, who we are as individuals, until nothing remains behind but our mouths that chatter on. What fate lies for the modern Erysichton?

From the *dependent creature*, the model of the human transitioned to the *autonomous individual*, in which the human presents oneself as a singular, autonomous, and independent. Despite this paradigm shift, the premise of human essence as “universal, unchanging, and independently originating” persisted. However, with the rise of modern technology, this model of the human as the *autonomous individual* is quickly dissipating. Since the assumption behind human essence remains the same in having the *dependent creature* and the *autonomous individual* as models of the human, this paper skips the phase in which the *autonomous individual* is the model of the human and goes right into the phase in which the *co-dependent network*, driven by cyberspace (social media), is the model of the human, which gives a different assumption of the human essence as “resulting from complex inter-relations that cause elements to *dependently originate* from each other.” This section defines the *co-dependent network* and cyberspace (social media).

A. Co-dependent Network

Applying oneself to cyberspace, the newly emerging definition of human essence challenges the traditional definitions found in the *dependent creature* and the

autonomous individual, which make “human essence” appear foundational and absolute. Instead, *the co-dependent network* provides a more flowing, flexible view of human essence in which myriad aspects of “human essence” co-originate with each other, seemingly with no distinct origin, fade away with time, and with other aspects emerging as “human essence” over time. To better understand this concept of the *co-dependent network*, I invite Buddhist notions of dependent origination and Taylor’s notion of schemata based on information theory.

Dependent origination is the Buddhist explanation for causality. In *The Foundations of Buddhism*, Gethin explains that when we look at any particular experience, while there is no denying that the experience occurs, one can question the existence of a constant, unchanging self beneath the experience.

What we find when we introspect, the Buddha suggests, is always some particular sense datum, some particular feeling, some particular idea, some particular wish or desire, some consciousness of something particular. And all these are constantly changing from one moment to the next; none of them remains for more than a mere moment.¹⁷

According to widely accepted Buddhist theory, these particularities—sense datum, feeling, idea, wish or desire, consciousness—all fall under the five aggregates. Together, the five aggregates compose what a Buddhist traditionally considers a safe network by which one can wholly analyze “the individual” or “the self”: *form* (or “matter”: material form or body of an existence), *sensations* (or “feelings”: received from *form*), *perceptions of sense objects* (e.g. perceiving “apple” as an “apple”), *mental activity or formations* (e.g. ideas or imaginations), and *consciousness*.¹⁸ When ‘I’ attempt to

¹⁷ Rupert Gethin, *Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 138.

¹⁸ While there are many disputes as to what the aggregates are, the main takeaway for this thesis is that they are co-dependent and co-create each other.

examine myself, what ‘I’ find isn’t a substantial person or being called ‘Mary,’ but particular experiences that all dependently originate from the five aggregates. To use Gethin’s analogy, much like two sheaves of grass leaning against one another, if you remove one element, the other one falls. Furthermore, the origin of suffering lies in particular attachment to these aggregates: “if we become attached and try to hold on to things that will inevitably change and disappear, then we are bound to suffer.”¹⁹

Then one may ask—What makes the human unique within this system of dependent origination? Surely the ‘I’ of yesterday is consistent with the ‘I’ of today, else it would be impossible to hold a person accountable for one’s actions. This is where causal connectedness comes in. The part that is ‘I’ is the “pattern” by which such clusters of the five aggregates form and dissipate. Events occur via specific clusters and patterns, and a ‘human being’ or ‘I’ is a “series of clusters of events (physical and mental) occurring in a ‘human’ pattern, as opposed to, say, the canine pattern of a ‘dog’.”²⁰ This causal connectedness accounts for how ‘I’ remain consistent over time. And possibly, by trying to recognize one’s ‘self’ via this ever-changing pattern frame, a ‘person’ is committing the grave mistake of establishing a static, permanent, constant, unchanging ‘self’ that in reality does not exist.

In *After God*, Taylor introduces a similar concept called *schemata* through modern information theory. One epistemological question that arises within modern information theory is the question of what separates information from “noise.” Quoting Bateson to explain this distinction, Taylor states that

Information and noise are not merely opposites but coemerge and remain codependent: *information is noise in formation*. Noise, in turn, interrupts by

¹⁹ Gethin, *Foundations*, 137.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

interfering with informative patterns. When understood this way, information stabilizes noise and noise destabilizes information. Inasmuch as the process of destabilization provides the occasion for the emergence of new informative patterns, it is not merely negative”²¹

Similar to how information is noise *in formation*, the human equates to the five aggregates *in formation*, in a certain pattern. Through modern information theory, Taylor comes up with the concept of *schemata*, which curiously mirrors the Buddhist definition of dependent origination.

Schemata are not independent of each other but are interrelated and mutually constitutive. Hence, schemata are neither eternal nor unchanging [...] but are emergent and evolve over time. [...] Finally, order and disorder are not simply opposite but are codependent in such a way that neither can be what it is apart from the other. [...] Neither a priori nor a posteriori, schemata arise within a specific context, which establishes the parameters of constraint that are the conditions of new entities and events.²²

Similar to dependent origination, schemata are neither a priori nor a posteriori, but arise simultaneously as co-originating, co-dependent, co-creative elements. However, they arise within a specific context, much like how the human arises with the five aggregates within the specific context of “human being.”

Taking these two concepts together, I use the term *co-dependent network* to refer to the newly uncovered “human essence” that is taking place in the globalized digital world.²³ Similar to dependent origination and schemata, *co-dependent network* refers *not* to any singular, universal, absolute, foundational “human essence” with a capital E, but to the *network phenomenon* by which every element, including traditional notions of “human essence,” come into play through a co-originating, co-dependent, co-creative

²¹ Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 16.

²² Taylor, *After God*, 15 – 16.

²³ It appears that Feuerbach may have been acquainted with this form of human nature. In his observation on subject-object, he states that when the human is conscious of an object, *at the same time*, one is also conscious of one’s subject.

structure. Much like how dependent origination and schemata function with no singular origin, but their elements give rise to one another, the *co-dependent network* function in the same manner. Within the *co-dependent network*, the human *dependently originates* through complex inter-relations and does not exist as an independent being on their own; so does everything else. The human *consists* of the *co-dependent network*, but also *composes* part of the “whole” *co-dependent network*. And when the human egregiously attaches to particular co-dependent phenomenon and mistakes it to be the *whole* of the co-dependent network, I call this the *skewed representation of the co-dependent network*. Like taking one dot of the famous *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* and assuming it to be the whole artwork, one runs the risk of thinking that a small piece of the *co-dependent network* consists of the whole, which would be a *skewed representation*. With this definition of the *co-dependent network*, I now turn to define cyberspace/social media.

B. Defining Cyberspace (Social Media)

While there are many definitions of cyberspace, for the purposes of this paper, I will draw on the following:

Cyberspace, amorphous, [is a] supposedly “virtual” world created by links between computers, Internet-enabled devices, servers, routers, and other components of the Internet’s infrastructure. As opposed to the Internet itself, however, cyberspace is the place produced by these links.²⁴

Cyberspace is the “virtual” environment set apart from the corporeal environment.

People in the corporeal world meet online in cyberspace to communicate through their personas. Cyberspace is the place in which people exchange emails, communicate

²⁴ Jennifer Bussell, “Cyberspace,” Encyclopædia Britannica (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., March 12, 2013), <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cyberspace>.

through social media, utilize search engines and more. The corporeal world and cyberspace are not mutually exclusive; cyberspace is accessed through hardware such as smartphones and laptops, and through software such as the Google Chrome and Mozilla Firefox. Cyberspace is a virtual space affected and reinvented by constant software and hardware updates. Here, it is important to distinguish cyberspace from software such as the Internet. While the Internet is crucial for cyberspace, and the main means by which cyberspace is accessed, “the Internet is a *technological artifact* that one goes on, whereas cyberspace is a *virtually accessible cultural space* that one goes in.”²⁵ In the common vernacular however, the Internet and cyberspace have converged, oftentimes being used interchangeably.

Social media is one *form* of cyberspace, accessed through popular technological artifacts, or in this case, platforms, which include Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Snapchat, Wechat, LinkedIn, Whatsapp, Pinterest, and many other services. Empirically defined by its platforms, social media has some common features.

1. Social Media are interactive Web 2.0 Internet-based applications.
2. User-generated content—texts, comments, photos, videos, and data generated through all online interactions—is the lifeblood of social media.
3. Individuals and groups create user-specific profiles for a site or app designed and maintained by a social media service
4. Social media facilitate the development of social networks online by connecting a user’s profile with those of other individuals and/or groups.²⁶

As my explanation will later show in the conclusion, Zoom and other teleconference platforms do not fall under this definition of social media; instead, they might as well

²⁵ Aubrey Slaughter, “The Chicago School of Media Theory Theorizing Media since 2003,” The Chicago School of Media Theory RSS, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://lucian.uchicago.edu/blogs/mediatheory/keywords/cyberspace/>.

²⁶ Jonathan A. Obar and Steven S. Wildman, “Social Media Definition and the Governance Challenge: An Introduction to the Special Issue,” *SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2637879>.

assume the role of the “anti” social media. Now comparing God with cyberspace (social media) and the *co-dependent network*, I give an account of how they are similar in characteristics to demonstrate how, mirroring the ancient in the modern world, cyberspace (social media) can facilitate the implosion of the *autonomous individual*.

IV. **OBSERVING CYBERSPACE VIA GOD: HOW THEIR SHARED CHARACTERISTICS FACILITATE THE IMPLOSION OF THE AUTONOMOUS INDIVIDUAL**

As Feuerbach notes, with God, “in the divine omniscience, man raises himself above the limits of his own knowledge; in the divine omnipresence, above the limits of his local standpoint; in the divine eternity, above the limits of his time.”²⁷ Likewise, in cyberspace, the human raises oneself above the limits of one’s knowledge, local standpoint, and time. This section compares cyberspace to God and extract some background characteristics that may facilitate the implosion of the *autonomous individual*. As this section gives a general analysis of cyberspace as a whole, I hope that it will help inform one’s initial interaction with social media as well.

To start with, when looking at vast ontological “space” that each occupies, Feuerbach’s conception of God and cyberspace, as *skewed representations of “human essence,”* are accessible via their respective many “predicates,” or the humans’ virtuous attributes and technological artifacts. For the religious human and God, while predicates refer to essences of what makes the human “*human*” (such as “love” that unifies the species), for the cyber human, the predicates are arguably *what makes the cyber-human “cyber,”* or the technological artifacts such as the Internet, smartphones, and social media platforms.²⁸ While neither perfect nor absolute, technological artifacts compose the many “aggregates” of the *skewed representation of the co-dependent network* that is cyberspace. Cyberspace and social media’s main access point, the Internet is interesting in that it is also a composite network in its character. As its name implies,

²⁷ Feuerbach, *Essence*, 216.

²⁸ Cyber human refers to a human who has access to and uses cyberspace.

the *Inter-net*, or the *World Wide Web*,²⁹ is a *web* of websites that are interconnected to one another through hyperlinks and hypertexts.

Furthermore, looking at vast ontological “time” that each occupies, Feuerbach’s conception of God and cyberspace both require the human to exert oneself out of one’s local and individualized time. In divine eternity, the human raises oneself above the limits of one’s time, and “God is exalted [...] above the limits of space and time.”³⁰ As Gotved notes, cyberspace exists as a timeless abstraction, which the cyber human accesses a reflexive whole: “the experience of time is changed from a biological and chronological order, and instead, the sense of time is annihilated by the ever-faster communication technology used to compress and de-sequence it.”³¹ In the human’s view, while God *appears* to be timeless due to God’s *immutability*, cyberspace *appears* timeless and outside the linear timeframe because of its *hyperfluidity*. This point is well illustrated in Warner’s observation in cyberspace’s main mode of existence, the Internet:

Once a website is up, it can be hard to tell how recently it was posted or revised, or how long it will continue to be posted. Most sites are not archived. For the most part they are not centrally indexed. The reflexive apparatus of web discourse consists mostly of hypertext links and search engines, and these are not punctual.³²

In interacting with the various elements of cyberspace, the user is faced with a sense of timelessness in that the network is so mobile and fluctuating that it appears to not be constrained by relations of precedence and posteriority. Or, “neither a priori nor a

²⁹ While the two terms are originally different, they have since converged to be used interchangeably.

³⁰ Feuerbach, *Essence*, 284.

³¹ Stine Gotved, “Time and Space in Cyber Social Reality,” *new media & society*, accessed March 27, 2021, https://www.andredeak.com.br/pdf/tempo_espaco_realidade_social.pdf, 468.

³² “Publics and Counterpublics,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, no. 4 (November 2002): pp. 413-425, <https://doi.org/10.1215/08992363-14-1-49>.

posteriori.” Because of this hyperfluidity, for the human, what content one accesses in cyberspace only exists within the moment it is accessed: “In cyberspace, chronological time is replaced by near instantaneity in the realization of action and potential reaction.”³³ It simply appears as “is” at the time of access, much like God who simply appears as “is.” Within the human’s limited view on temporality of “the present,” God is the Same and immutable, and cyberspace is hyper-fluid and ever-changing; yet because of these opposing qualities, both appear to the human as timeless in the moment of access.

Due to their vastness in “space” and “time,” God and cyberspace are both only partially known within the human’s limited view as “infinite.” In turn, reaching up to or “accessing” God or cyberspace allows the human to be lifted out of one’s local standpoint for the sake of the more collective “species.” However, as the *autonomous individual*, the human cannot reside for long in the realm of the species. As one’s engagement with God increases, the ontological spatiotemporality of *the autonomous individual* is stretched to its limits, slowly fraying and dissipating. Similar with cyberspace. To give an example from media studies, renowned scholar McLuhan argues that when the human’s sense faculties are extended through different media, so is the human’s sense of their identity. He notes: “Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.”³⁴ Using a bodily metaphor, he

³³ Nazli Choucri, “Emerging Trends in Cyberspace: Dimensions & Dilemmas,” accessed March 26, 2021, <https://nchoucri.mit.edu/sites/default/files/documents/%5BChoucri%5D%202012%20Emerging%20Trends%20in%20Cyberspace-Dimensions%20%26%20Dilemmas.pdf>, 54.

³⁴ McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 5.

illustrates how technology is now extensions of the human as well; and for the scope of this paper, cyberspace (social media). Under the model of the human as the *autonomous individual*, with the invention of cyberspace, the concept of space and temporality have radically changed for the human. Despite this rapid change, McLuhan states, “we continue to think in the old, fragmented space and time patterns of the pre-electric age.”³⁵ And so, in the age of God or cyberspace (social media), the religious or cyber human surrenders the “self” based on the *autonomous individual* for the higher realm of the “species,” which gives a bigger scope of ontological spatiotemporality to identify with instead.

In the modern world, such implosion of the *autonomous individual* can be translated into the language of attention economy. According to Matthew Crawford, the founder of the Center for Humane Technology, “attention economy” focuses on attention as a primary currency in society: “Attention is a resource—a person has only so much of it.”³⁶ With the COVID-19 pandemic changing the digital world *not* as complementing the social reality we live in, like before, but rather composing the whole of it, the distribution of attention is crucial more than ever. Attention economy defines attention as a process in which we experience “focused mental engagement on a particular item of information. Items come into our awareness, we attend to a particular

³⁵ Ibid., 6.

³⁶ Matthew B. Crawford, “Opinion | The Cost of Paying Attention (Published 2015),” The New York Times (The New York Times, March 7, 2015), <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/08/opinion/sunday/the-cost-of-paying-attention.html?smid=fb-nytopinion&smtyp=cur&fbclid=IwARoxYrgxbktN9afhWenqlDMympPlocEQzAolkvyBbCobtk2A35gXb6kpMyE>.

item, and then we decide whether to act.”³⁷ In a capitalist society, the *autonomous individual’s* “self”-insight is rarely worth much compared to information and knowledge that can be translated into valuables, e.g. money and data commodity. This suggests that instead of investing in themselves and “self”-knowledge, people would rather use that attention for something more objectively valued. There is less gravity and value on reflection on the individual “self”; it requires too much attention—a scarce resource, which translates to one “losing money” by not doing something productive. In addition, because digital civilization is becoming a larger part of people’s lives, this phenomenon implies that one is putting less attention on defining the *autonomous individual* offline. Social media is one of the more prominent ways by which people communicate online: 45% of the world population is reported to use social media, and people spend an average of 3 hours on social media.³⁸

Observing background characteristics of cyberspace via God, I now turn to examine how cyberspace (social media) acts to alienate the human much like Feuerbach’s God does. Much like the religious human with God, the cyber human with social media slowly surrenders “human essence” in favor of a *skewed representation* of such “human essence.” In doing so, since we are experiencing a paradigm shift between the *autonomous individual* and the *co-dependent network*, I invite the two different biases each model of the human brings into accessing one’s essence. One bias, under *the dependent* creature and *autonomous individual*, claims human essence to be “universal,

³⁷ Thomas H. Davenport and John C. Beck, *The Attention Economy: Understanding the New Currency of Business* (Boston: Harvard Business School, 2005), 20.

³⁸ Maryam Mohsin, “10 Social Media Statistics You Need to Know in 2021[Infographic],” Oberlo (Oberlo, March 18, 2021), <http://www.oberlo.com/blog/social-media-marketing-statistics>.

unchanging, and independently originating.” The other bias, under the *co-dependent network*, claims human essence to be “resulting from complex inter-relations that cause elements to *dependently originate* from each other.”

V. **ALIENATION IN CYBERSPACE (SOCIAL MEDIA): THE EVENTUAL IMPLOSION OF THE AUTONOMOUS INDIVIDUAL**

For Feuerbach, the religious human perverts the appropriate conceptualization of the human essence—which should be to the *species-being*—to God. Likewise, in the digital world, when it comes to cyberspace (social media), the cyber human perverts the appropriate conceptualization of the human essence—*the co-dependent network*—to cyberspace (social media). Because of such perversion, the human faces alienation. This section outlines the process of alienation found in Feuerbach’s treatment of God and mirrors it onto cyberspace (social media). Since we are now experiencing a paradigm shift from one model of the human to another, or from the *autonomous individual* to the *co-dependent network*, this alienation manifests in the languages of both paradigms. In other words, alienation initially occurs with the human regarding one’s self and essence as “universal, unchanging, and independently originating” while failing to understand that one’s self and essence “result from complex inter-relations that cause elements to *dependently originate* from each other.”

First, the human *empties one’s essence*, the human-patterned assortments of co-dependent “aggregates,” into the separate entity “social media.” Instead of understanding the complex nature of the *co-dependent network* that the human is composed of (and constitutes) in itself, using social media as a medium, the human severs and empties various parts of oneself onto social media. Because the human is still biased towards regarding one’s self and essence as under the *autonomous individual*, what the human severs and empties onto social media is regarded (by oneself and others) as an absolute and foundational representation of that particular human. To use the example of dependent origination, instead of recognizing how intertwined and

dependently originating aspects of “I” are, the human severs and empties parts of oneself onto Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and other social media platforms. Posting flattering images of oneself, food, travel and otherwise on Instagram; tweeting daily thoughts and opinions on Twitter; reading and arguing with strangers on various articles posted on Facebook. Together, one’s activities online—whether it be images, texts, gifs, memes—point to a carefully (or carelessly) *curated image* online. Such an image, in turn, is treated as “universal” (widespread among users to the point of ubiquity), “unchanging” (the human *is always* like the curated image), and “independently originating” (the curated image innately originates from the particular human who *purely* acts out of their own volition and nothing else). With a tendency to express only the flattering parts of one’s “self” on social media, the human fails to realize the co-dependent nature of things, but “severs” the flattering parts away from the unflattering ones and expresses them on social media. Even when the content is unflattering, it still stands that the human is involved in this “severing” process; by choosing to express a part of oneself on cyberspace (social media), which can never consist in the whole of oneself, the human is involved in a process of severing.³⁹

Second, during this process, the human idealizes “social media.” There are two ways in which this happens. One is through one’s curated image based on the *autonomous individual*. As Stephen Marche notes in one column of the Atlantic, “Our online communities become engines of self-image, and self-image becomes the engine of

³⁹ One might argue that such “severing” can happen on other forms of media. Any form of expression, really. This is correct. However, as my argument will show in this section, social media is more devious and insidious than other forms of media because of its nature of consisting in hypertexts, which encourages the human to have a *skewed representation of the co-dependent network*.

community.”⁴⁰ People try to portray only smooth images of themselves online; social media has often been criticized for its involvement in creating unrealistic standards, whether it be in terms of beauty, ethics, and more. The “Instagram Face,” for example, promotes “an overly tan skin tone, a South Asian influence with the brows and eye shape, an African-American influence with the lips, a Caucasian influence with the nose, a cheek structure that is predominantly Native American and Middle Eastern.”⁴¹ “Cancel culture,” while helpful for marginalized communities to raise their voices against authorities, can also be incredibly toxic and simplistic in branding people for their past mistakes, heavily criticizing individuals and stunting their growth as people.⁴² As President Obama cautioned in October 2019, “The world is messy; there are ambiguities [...] People who do really good stuff have flaws. [...] This idea of purity and you’re never compromised and you’re always politically ‘woke’ and all that stuff [...] You should get over that quickly.”⁴³

The second way that the human idealizes “social media” is much more insidious and devious: despite attempts to criticize and bring to light all the ways social media is anything else than neutral, thanks to its making via hypertexts, social media is

⁴⁰ Stephen Marche, “Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?,” The Atlantic (Atlantic Media Company, January 21, 2020), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/05/is-facebook-making-us-lonely/308930/>.

⁴¹ Jia Tolentino, “The Age of Instagram Face,” The New Yorker, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/decade-in-review/the-age-of-instagram-face>.

⁴² While used in this context for accessibility’s sake, there are issues with the word “cancel culture.” For more information, please go to https://twitter.com/js_rubin/status/1283493699373203465.

⁴³ Emily S. Rueb and Derrick Bryson Taylor, “Obama on Call-Out Culture: ‘That’s Not Activism’,” The New York Times (The New York Times, October 31, 2019), <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/31/us/politics/obama-woke-cancel-culture.html>.

presented as *the “whole” of the co-dependent network* that presents the user with a wide-set lens by which it offers the viewpoint of the whole wide world, not just the immediate world surrounding the user. In *Hypertext 3.0*, Landow gives a good definition of hypertext: “text composed of blocks of words (or images) linked electronically by multiple paths, chains, or trails in an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality described by the terms *link*, *node*, *network*, *web*, and *path*.”⁴⁴ A good example would be the website links that users use every time to access the Internet, cyberspace, and social media. www.facebook.com, www.instagram.com, www.linkedin.com are all hypertexts linked electronically to social media. Furthermore, Landow perfectly captures the seemingly co-dependent nature of hypertexts via quoting Barthes, stating that

“In this ideal text,” says Barthes, “the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*, they are indeterminable...; the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language.”⁴⁵

In “an open-ended, perpetually unfinished textuality,” hypertext carries the nature of the *co-dependent network* in that the media within—*hypermedia*, or images, sounds, videos, and other forms of data that appear as “text” in hypertext—affect each other to the point that they appear to co-create each other and are co-dependent. “A galaxy of signifiers” that have no substance in itself, but are pointing to something else, hypertext has no beginning nor end. Like the *co-dependent network*, hypertext presents the

⁴⁴ George P. Landow, *Hypertext 3.0: Critical Theory and New Media in an Era of Globalization* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 2.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

human with a flux of elements by which no one element is “the main one.” It appears as indeterminable, it appears as infinite. With this in mind, while social media is not a neutral technology, similar to how God can partly appear as a representation of species-being, hypertext is a key element by which social media, and further by which cyberspace, can partly appear as a representation of the *co-dependent network*.

However, as filter bubbles and echo chambers indicate, social media is *not* representative of the “whole” of the *co-dependent network*. Instead, filter bubbles and echo chambers provide *skewed representations of the co-dependent network*. Filter bubbles” are the “intellectual isolation that can occur when websites make use of algorithms to selectively assume the information a user would want to see, and then give the information to the user.”⁴⁶ As websites feed the user with certain specific information that the user would want to see, the digital world provides a *skewed perspective on the co-dependent network* by catering to their needs and wants, effectively creating a “bubble” that filters out information that the user would not be interested in. This, in turn, results in “echo chambers” which refer to a “situation where certain ideas, beliefs or data points are reinforced through repetition of a closed system that does not allow for the free movement of alternative or competing ideas.”⁴⁷ Living in echo chambers, individuals have ample ground to realize their illusion that the self based on the *autonomous individual* is still extant and persistent. And so, having a skewed *co-dependent network* present itself as the “whole” of the *co-dependent*

⁴⁶ Techopedia, “What Is a Filter Bubble? - Definition from Techopedia,” Techopedia.com (Techopedia, May 29, 2012), <http://www.techopedia.com/definition/28556/filter-bubble>.

⁴⁷ Techopedia, “What Is an Echo Chamber? - Definition from Techopedia,” Techopedia.com (Techopedia, November 4, 2016), <http://www.techopedia.com/definition/23423/echo-chamber>.

network, the user is tricked into believing that what they see is more general and universal than their immediate world, which is the farthest thing from the truth.

Third, social media now *alienates the* human through its presence. With the case of the curated image, biased for the *autonomous individual*, the human is alienated from the *co-dependent network* by being stuck in a certain version of oneself created online, which is but a fraction of what one is. The algorithm may update as the user progresses and learns. However, this is still based on a certain aspect of the user which is all based around voluntary choice which is heavily skewed towards portraying one's self-image as flattering and competitive in the image market. Curating an image online, one grows attached to certain, often superficial aspects that are desirable in the globalized digital world. Seeing others in their perfect universe, the user may feel inferior in facing one's whole "self," or the *co-dependent network*—which contains both the good *and* the bad, and in turn feel alienated from one's "self and essence." With the case of *the skewed representation of the co-dependent network*, by understanding social media as the "whole" of the *co-dependent network*, the human finds oneself alienated from the corporeal world in which different opinions exist and influence the human; preferring a seemingly universal network that always caters to and says "yes" to the user, the human grows more alienated from the "whole" of the *co-dependent network* that encompasses both the "no" and the "yes." Such alienation and confusion seem to have their effect on human beings. Studies show that there is a high correlation between the use of social media and depression.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Melissa G. Hunt et al., "No More FOMO: Limiting Social Media Decreases Loneliness and Depression," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 37, no. 10 (2018): pp. 751-768, <https://doi.org/10.1521/jscp.2018.37.10.751>.

Fourth, the human, now alienated from one's "self" and essence, *relies on this skewed re-presentation of the co-dependent network* to access one's "self" and essence. In *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, McLuhan warns of such a process happening with modern technology through the example of Narcissus. Pointing to the danger of being immersed in media and how the human faces doom by falling in love with one's own image expressed via media, he uses Narcissus to state that "this extension of himself by mirror numbed his perceptions until he became the servomechanism of his own extended image [...] He was numb. He had adapted to his extension of himself and had become a closed system."⁴⁹ Losing oneself in the mirror, i.e. social media, the modern Narcissus becomes disconnected from the outside environment, e.g. the surrounding 'real' world outside of cyberspace, and only connects himself through the extended image in the mirror.

However, modern technology—cyberspace and social media included—don't stop at rendering the human as the modern Narcissus. Not only is one numb to the outside world, but one grows to be Erysichton, constantly craving media and information, until one devours one's self as established by the *autonomous individual*. But is this necessarily a bad thing? After the individual self has been devoured, what remains behind is the *illusion* of the self based on the *autonomous individual*, which the human could choose to be attached to, or dis-attach from. Unfortunately, social media encourages this attachment to the illusion of the self based on the *autonomous individual* by 1. Marketing the ideal of the *autonomous individual* as data commodities 2. Providing a *skewed representation of the co-dependent network*. First, on social media, celebrating

⁴⁹ Marshall McLuhan and W. Terrence Gordon, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Berkeley, CA: Gingko Press, 2015), 63.

the *autonomous individual* through curated images pays off in forms of sponsored advertisements and endorsements. As Jia Tolentino notes, “social media has supercharged the propensity to regard one’s personal identity as a potential source of profit—and, especially for young women, to regard one’s body this way, too.”⁵⁰ Famous social influencer Kylie Jenner is reported to make 1.2 million dollars for a single Instagram post; singer Ariana Grande, 966K dollars; soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo, 975K dollars.⁵¹ With a carefully curated image online, user attaches oneself to this given image, and through it, continues to pursue the illusion of a self based on the *autonomous individual*. Second, not only does the user *attach* oneself to this image, but the AI system as we know it makes the user cling to it by catering to this curated image and only showing relevant information through filter bubbles and echo chambers.

Put it in a different light, the illusion of the self based on the *autonomous individual* can manifest in three different directions: 1. Attach itself to universality 2. Attach itself to particularities 3. Extinguish completely. When the illusion of the self—craving the self formerly established by the *autonomous individual*—attaches itself to universality in the world of social media, this manifests as extremist absolute ideals, generalizing statements and closed systems which defends themselves against all outside criticisms. When the illusion of the self, on the other hand, attaches itself to particularities in the world of social media, this manifests as obsession over particular labelling and identification (e.g. stan culture: *are you one of us?*), the use of hashtags,

⁵⁰ Jia Tolentino, “The Age of Instagram Face,” *The New Yorker*, accessed March 26, 2021, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/decade-in-review/the-age-of-instagram-face>.

⁵¹ “How Much Does Kylie Jenner Earn on Instagram? - CBBC Newsround,” BBC News (BBC), accessed March 26, 2021, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/49124484>.

and more. Of course, the attachment to universality and particularities are not mutually exclusive; in some cases, they share a tight connection in which a social media user uses particular labels to universalize their claim and position. Finally, if the illusion of the self completely extinguishes, this would open the door for the human to engage in serious conversation with others about bettering the community through a democratic process in which not only humans but other beings and entities (e.g. animals and Earth) have voices and advocacy. As the human's sense of "self," established by the *autonomous individual*, is imploding in the globalized digital era, we are witnessing a transitional period—what Kuhn would refer to as a paradigm shift—in the concept of "human essence."

VI. IMPLICATIONS OF THE IMPLOSION OF THE AUTONOMOUS INDIVIDUAL: CONTINGENT PERSONHOOD

Continuing the conversation on the implosion of the *autonomous individual* under cyberspace (social media), I now turn to explore the implications of such implosion for the human's sense of personhood. By doing so, I hope to leave room for further discussion, possibly in another paper, about the shift in ethics that must occur under the implosion of the autonomous personhood and the rise of the contingent personhood.

I outline two perspectives: humanist and non-humanist. In the humanist perspective, the human "I" or humans possesses ownership of and control over being a person. In non-humanist perspective, non-human entities possess ownership and control over being a person.

Within the humanist perspective, I outline two personhoods: autonomous and general personhood. In autonomous personhood, the human, or the individual subject "I" possesses ownership of and control over being a person. The modern notion of individualism, in which a person exists as a singular being nested in oneself and no one else, with *the individual* dictating and managing that predicates that define the human as a person, is a classic example of autonomous personhood: *I am the master of my fate; I am the captain of my soul*. In general personhood, under Feuerbach's conception of the non-religious human with the species-being as innate human nature, *humans* possess ownership and control over personhood. The model of the human as the *autonomous individual* falls under autonomous personhood.

Within the non-humanist perspective, I outline one personhood: in contingent personhood, non-human entities, such as God, mass society, and cyberspace (social

media), possess ownership of and control over being a person. Here, the term “contingent” lies at the opposite end of the spectrum to “autonomous”: with little notion of the individual subject, open to and dependent on external influences for one’s sense of “essence.” The notion of the human as *an individual* is greatly diminished. The personhood, which no longer belongs to the individual subject, is outlined by external influences: the human offers or submits oneself to the “higher” “collectives” realms of God, mass society, cyberspace (social media), etc. The model of the human as the *dependent creature* and *co-dependent network* fall under contingent personhood.

While one’s contingent personhood can be dictated by democratic communal discussions, oftentimes, it appears that such personhood falls under a specific “dictator.” For the religious human, it is dictated by God; for the cyber human, it is dictated by those chosen in cyberspace (social media) to take center stage. The religious human, making oneself an object to God, gives up one’s *personality* for God, which is a partial and *skewed representation* of species-being. Likewise, the cyber human, making oneself an object to cyberspace (social media), surrenders one’s subject-hood and agency for cyberspace (social media), which is a partial and *skewed representation* of the *co-dependent network*, largely dictated by particular special interest groups, while appearing as universal and neutral. With this version of contingent personhood, there are two implications. First, the human has no ownership over their predicates, or virtuous attributes of the human species, which are externally assigned to and managed for them. Furthermore, while there is no sense of the *autonomous individual*, it may deviously offer an illusion of it; the human possesses a fictional narrative of agency in that if one commits an act that is morally condemnable, one would be held individually responsible for one’s actions.

With this in mind, I now turn to outline how contingent personhood manifests in cyberspace (social media), an example of how it is dictated, and the two implications that follow. First, as a being accessing cyberspace (social media), the user quickly finds that there is little room for the individual subject online: most things are created in collaboration with multiple individuals. Without detailed knowledge about technology, the person, their construction of identity, and their expression of the self are all within and under the influence of the existing framework. All cyber identities and environment are contingent on what is digitally created and provided through complex algorithms that are beyond a singular human's purview. There is nothing "autonomous" or free-standing in cyberspace—no matter what a person does, they are engaging in a culmination of open collaborative effort. Under these terms, there is no autonomy in the digital world; the whole of the cyber human is contingently exposed to a higher authority of the Internet and network, vulnerable to cyber-attacks and hackers. Cryptography helps constitute the most valuable part of one's identity; countless infringements on one's privacy are blatant examples of how contingent the cyber human's existence is online.

One great example of the fact that contingent personhood is dictated under cyberspace (social media) is the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal, in which the personal data of millions of Facebook users were collected without their consent to be used for political advertising. Harvesting up to 87 million Facebook profiles, Cambridge Analytica used the information to aid Ted Cruz and Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential campaign.⁵² By sending customized advertisements to sway

⁵² Nicholas Confessore, "Cambridge Analytica and Facebook: The Scandal and the Fallout So Far," *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, April 4, 2018),

different US voters to vote for Cruz and Trump,⁵³ Facebook and Cambridge Analytica had provided a *skewed representation of the co-dependent network* in that what each voter saw on Facebook was not the whole of the message that each candidate presented, nor the whole of the election scene, but targeted towards certain candidates.

The implications that the cyber human has no ownership over one's predicates and is faced with the illusion of the self based on the *autonomous individual* is blatantly observed through the influencer-follower culture and "cancel culture." With contingent personhood, one has lost the steering wheel over one's personhood; instead, one follows certain users and platforms to shape one's personhood online. By collecting or "following" bits and pieces of information and opinions, the user aggregates such information to form their identity in cyberspace. Much like how the religious human longs to be free from individual limitations and form a species or "higher being" via God, the cyber human volunteers the abnegation of their individual subject, minimizing their agency and thought for the sake of those chosen in cyberspace (social media) to take center stage, or the influencers one follows or likes. Similar to how the religious human gives up one's *personality* for God, the user gives up one's personality for the influencers, gravitating around one's feed teeming with posts from influencers and pages to "feed" and "build" their personality online. By doing so, the cyber human quietly gives oneself the illusion of the self based on the *autonomous individual*, in both "feeding" and "building" their personality online ("I" equate to what the user constructs

<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/us/politics/cambridge-analytica-scandal-fallout.html>.

⁵³ "Leaked: Cambridge Analytica's Blueprint for Trump Victory," The Guardian (Guardian News and Media, March 23, 2018), <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/mar/23/leaked-cambridge-analyticas-blueprint-for-trump-victory>.

online as their personality) *and* in one's treatment of such influencers who are thrown into the spotlight as the epitome of the *autonomous individual*, but ones with *all the virtuous attributes of the human species*. Strangely enough, in this manner, we see that influencers are treated as Gods that wield unduly power, with users seemingly uncritically receiving and passively regurgitating whatever posts and information are handed down to them from influencers. *However*, when the influencers commit egregious wrongs, users are quick to disown and sever them as idols and false Gods. Why? Since the influencers replace God as figures holding the user's predicates, or virtuous attributes of the human species, they have to be perfect. No wrongs can be committed. But since influencers are human beings, flaws—big and small—are committed. And when that happens, the cyber human rebukes one's adoration of the influencers, for now they have fallen as the epitome of the *autonomous individual*, and have now revealed themselves to be idols and false Gods. Of course, there are those that take the opposite route, defending the influencers no matter what they do and showering them with adoration nonetheless. But for those who rebuke the influencers as false Gods, the high-profile personalities are cast aside and "canceled" by the users who rely on the bigger "higher being" *of a skewed representation of the co-dependent network* they consider to be universal, with conviction that others in the *co-dependent network* would follow suit. The "cancelled" influencers, who have fallen as the epitome of the *autonomous individual* to become *just an autonomous individual*, must now face the consequences of their actions as such.

VII. CONCLUSION

What does this mean for the age of Zoom during the COVID-19 pandemic? With more people working remotely from home, the use of Zoom has grown exponentially. Applying the paper's arguments to Zoom, I discover some interesting details that separates Zoom from the rest of social media.

As noted, alienation occurs on social media via one's curated image based on the *autonomous individual* and having a *skewed representation of the co-dependent network* (re: Section V). Zoom, by denying the users from having a curated image, and giving hyper-representation of the *co-dependent network*, appears to be the "anti" social media.

With a mode to disable self-view, Zoom seems to be aware of its users' tendency to be hyper-aware of how they look on camera. In real-life or on other social media platforms, the continuity in self-expression tend to be limited and controlled in that despite reactions—likes, follows, comments, and more—the human does not get a 24/7, constantly updating image of their self like Zoom. Selection of flattering images of oneself, available on other social media, is no longer possible on camera, on video, on Zoom. Despite Zoom's poorly made video filters and backgrounds, one does not have as much access or control over one's image as on other platforms such as Facebook or Twitter. Oftentimes, we even reveal our personal and private space working from home. Sessions are often recorded. By denying the users from having a curated image—a long-time characteristic of social media, Zoom provides a different perspective to the Narcissus analogy. As one popular meme notes: "I am Narcissus and my little zoom square is my lake." One is numbed by one's image in the "lake." But not out of

infatuation; out of paralysis. As one notices that the mirror continuously reflects one's image, giving one no chance to prune one's image, one is paralyzed by hypervigilance.

Staring into the little Zoom squares teeming with different users, the human also becomes hyper-aware of the *co-dependent network*. Spending time on Zoom, the human starts becoming more and more aware of one's individual time and space, in relation to Zoom's time and space, in relation to other users' time and space. While meeting together in a physical location gives participants a sense of *shared time and space*, meeting together in a virtual location gives participants a fractured sense of time and space, both as a group and as an individual. Using Zoom, the human starts to occupy *at least* two different locations at the same time, the myriad time and space that other users are in. Extending the dissipation of the self based on the *autonomous individual* via vast space and time (re: Section IV), such characteristic of Zoom and other teleconference applications explain the reason behind Zoom fatigue: it reflects the tension between the human's resistance to such dissipation and Zoom's threat to dissipate the human's localized, *individualized* sense of time and space. Accessing social media gives the human a slice of this dissipation of the self based on individualized time and space; Zoom is a continuous experience of such dissipation. While other social media platforms "ease" such dissipation, and even goes against it by providing a curated image of the self based on the *autonomous individual*, such a selection process is not possible on Zoom. Relative to other social media platforms, Zoom resembles a hyper-representation of the *co-dependent network* because of this reason. The user is forced to face other users' time and space, seemingly fractured from one's own, which is integrated into one place by Zoom. From the perspective of the *autonomous individual*—judging "my" time and space separate from others' time and space, *acutely*

aware of one's individual time and space, the Zoom participant must relinquish “my” time and space for the sake of a larger being like God or cyberspace (social media) (re: Section IV); in this case, Zoom. But this time, unlike other social media platforms that are skewed for special interest groups, Zoom provides a fairly transparent environment in use.

Zoom is the “anti” social media. It gives not an alienation, but a hyper-connection. Not a curated image, but a candid one. Not a *skewed representation of the co-dependent network*, but a hyper-awareness of how limited the perspective of the *autonomous individual* is, and in turn, a relinquishing of such perspective, hopefully, for the *co-dependent network*. As people settle into the world of Zoom after the COVID-19 pandemic, I am ambivalent that such frequent usage of Zoom will bring change in people's perspective for the better, the reasons which I outline below.

On the one hand, the initial paralyzing contact with the *co-dependent network* may drive the Zoom participant to revert to “bad habits” to ground oneself. Similar to how users attach themselves to the illusion of the self based on the *autonomous individual* via universality and particularity, the Zoom participant may be inclined to view oneself in such manners under the partial and *skewed representation of the co-dependent network*. This means that the user would view oneself in even a much more *passive* light due to one's realization that one is part of a *co-dependent network*— which, compared to being an *autonomous individual*, superficially does not seem to give as much agency and power to one human (“there is nothing one person can do to change the *co-dependent network*)— but one that severs the extent of the *co-dependent network* to suit one's temperament (“this political ideology suits me better than the other one”). I say *temperament* and not critical thinking, because this phenomenon is

another backlash from the paradigm shift in the model of the human. Moving from the *autonomous individual* to the *co-dependent network*, the human's temperament and emotions are much more of a powerful, intuitive, and basic standard by which one feels grounded as the *autonomous individual* than critical thinking and ideologies, and therefore the last element of judgement that the human is willing to let go of within that model of the human.

On the other hand, after initial contact, the Zoom participant may subconsciously accept and ease into the world of inter-relations. Looking at contingent personhood (re: Section VI), I have only observed what happens on cyberspace via social media by allocating the cultivation of predicates to certain influencers and exacerbating in the illusion of the self based on the *autonomous individual*. However, as of April 2021, Zoom acts as the "anti" social media, still fairly transparent in that it is relatively difficult for hidden special interest groups to dictate the Zoom world, and aggressive in its dissipation of the self based on the *autonomous individual*. For those who champion the rise of contingent personhood, Zoom may be a complete game-changer that will further facilitate the fall of the autonomous personhood.