David Nowell Smith

# The Ontotheologics of Personal ‚Data‘

*for Virgil Brower*

## 1. Introduction

The term *ontotheology* I take from Heidegger. It describes a pattern of thinking which grasps being through some absolute, original, or fundamental entity or postulate which serves (to adopt Greek roots brought together in the portmanteau) as a *θεὸς* that underpins τὸ ὄν. Ontotheology thus describes any interpretation of being that depends on a ‚first‘ being, or an entity that is ‚most‘ being: that the question of ‚what is being‘ shifts away from the fact that beings *are* towards something like a substance that underpins being, which itself becomes the criterion for what is ‚most‘ being. It is not that one becomes a theologian of being (a criticism often enough levelled at Heidegger himself), but rather that the frameworks through which we think ‚being‘ – as origin or first cause, as substance, as totality, perfection, transcendence, constant presence, infinite knowledge etc. – rely on modes of thinking themselves more properly thought of as theo-logical.

The category of *personal ‚data‘* is perhaps unexpectedly suffused with ontotheology (or, better, ontotheo-*logic*).[1] This is, after all, a product of the furthest reaches of technological and administrative modernity; surely we are beyond positing an originary substance? And yet, in the current controversies around what is variously called the ‚data subject‘ or “informational person” (Koopman

**1** Why approach the question of personal ‚data‘ in terms of onto-theologics rather than *Gestell*, or Heidegger’s broader critique of technology? Firstly, because I aim to identify ontotheologic modes of thinking not just in the technology itself, but also in humanistic polemics about data privacy, which themselves overlap somewhat with Heidegger’s account of technology as transforming humans into its ‚standing-reserve‘ [*Bestand*] such that we become ‚human resources‘ (Heidegger 1977, p. 18). And second, because whereas *Gestell* on Heidegger’s account is a mode of disclosure (linked itself to the *Geschick*, or historical destining/sending, of being (p. 24), my own account will posit such modes of (en)framing more resolutely with human historical activity: ontotheology describes a mode of thinking rather than a disclosure of being. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me on this point.

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2019, p. 12), both the categories of *data* and *person* are routinely posited as ontotheological absolutes. This essay will reflect on the ‚person' of personal data, mired as it is in ontotheologics.

Heidegger uses the term *ontotheological* across his œuvre, and not entirely consistently.[2] His usage has little to do with Immanuel Kant's employment of the term, as a theology that seeks to know the existence of an original being solely by means of concepts (Thomson 2000, p. 322–333; Kant 1998, p. 584 [A632/B660]). Heidegger's interpretation – in which being is grasped in terms of a kind of *theos*, an originary being, a substance underpinning being, or that which is ‚most' being – would include not just this approach to theology but also modes of thinking that have historically been considered ‚atheistic'.

However, there is another set of connotations that the word *ontotheology* will no doubt conjure up, and which certainly resound throughout our contemporary polemics on the (over)reach of data science: that of mysticism inflecting discussions of ontology. It is clear enough that, for all its scientism, the information age has inspired its fair share of mystics, whether in the form of cyberpunk fiction, techno-optimist gurus brandishing prophecies like Moore's Law,[3] or the data-mysticism that treats the data as an immanent, omnipresent substance, where we seek unmediated access to the data-oracle: "With enough data, the numbers speak for themselves" (Anderson 2008).[4] But the data-oracle speaks in tongues; whence the need for an esoteric language (the algorithm) to unlock its secrets – a language spoken only by the "high priests" of data analytics (Zuboff 2019, p. 187).

In part this is surely a result of sudden technological change and technological capacities for which we have but mystical tropes to habituate ourselves. But Zuboff's point in speaking of "high priests" is less that data itself becomes a God-postulate, than that the "division of learning" of the pre-Reformation priesthood is reworked for the digital age: an élite whose specific kind of knowledge, couched in a language unavailable to the majority, allows for the powers they

**2** Iain Thomson (2000) provides a helpful overview of some of the instances where Heidegger does discuss ontotheology.

**3** As Melanie Mitchell has observed, "Moore's Law", the rule of thumb that computer processing speed roughly doubles every two years, has become something of an article of faith among techno-optimists (Mitchell 2019, p. 55). There is rather satisfying irony in seeing an assertion of the inexorable progress of scientific innovation couches in the language of pseudo-scientism and magical thinking; yet, like the more traditional domains of magic (incantations and spells, war dances, etc.), it is not without efficacy in inspiring its followers to enact its vision.

**4** Here as throughout I will use the word "data" in the singular, as an uncountable collective noun, rather than as the plural of the Latin *datum*.

serve to construct modes of governing that majority – which Zuboff likens to "pre-Gutenberg order" (Zuboff, p. 190).

If one of the ‚theological aesthetics' picked up in the call for papers for this collection took the register of the sublime, in which ‚data' stands as fundamentally ungraspable, to be experienced through an absolute power, absolute magnitude, whose presentation is aesthetic as it resists assimilation into our understanding (Kant 2000, p. 131), then this lies in no small part in the data-illiteracy of the rest of us: the esoterism of data science is a socio-political phenomenon as much as it is theological. This is linked to another contemporary phenomenon in which socio-political divisions of learning converge with political theology: the curious intersection of élite government-by-data-management and populist political strategy on a notionally libertarian, anti-state Right, in which a highly developed form of ultra-technocracy articulates itself as the rejection of technocrats, reveals a profound debt to Carl Schmitt's own "political theology", with its vision of sovereignty as the decision that outstrips and underpins the norm (Schmitt 2005, p. 10). To which, of course, they add a further theological postulate in the shape of a unitary "will" of a unitary "people" that the sovereign must incarnate (something Schmitt himself disputes, distinguishing between the "organic unity" of the people and the "decisionist unity" of the sovereign, Schmitt, p. 49). Just as sovereignty offers a principle of decisionist power above political process ("mere discussion" for Schmitt), so does popular will embody some transcendent political *substance* to which questions of policy, process, or practice are subordinate.

While these discourses are not the focus of the current article, they are nevertheless its context. For this essay, I'll stick to the more circumscribed (though still vast) question of the ‚person' of ‚personal data', and the collisions of ontotheologics that currently shape our discourse.

## 2. The bit as onto(theo)logical unit

First of all, we need to appreciate that the binary digit, or *bit*, for all its unprepossessing smallness – and indeed, by virtue of this smallness – constitutes perhaps the furthest reaching contributions to ontotheology of the last century. The innocuousness of the word is part of its success: in common usage the *bit* is the very opposite of measurement – small, surely, but its casual, offhand register is matched by the indeterminacy it betokens. But as an ontological unit, this is an advantage as much as a pitfall, furnishing a mobility and versatility that has allowed the *bit* to serve as fundamental unit for disciplines as varied as genetics and quantum physics ("It from bit," as John Archibald Wheeler famously put

it (Wheeler 1989, p. 310).) And qua binary digit, it has a philosophical heritage that reaches back not just to Boolean logic, but to Aristotle's law of the excluded middle, the basic assertion that if P then not not-P. Anything and everything shall be translated into a binary assertion of is/not: either 1 or 0. This is of course at heart an *ontological* claim: whether or not this datum *is*.

The *bit*, I would suggest, becomes a third great *ontotheology* in the history of Western thought, bringing together some of the virtues of the two prior ontotheological postulates: the Platonic idea or form (*eidos*) and the materialist atom (which of course corresponds to the conceptual pair of form and matter). That Plato's *eidos* should constitute an ontotheology is unsurprising enough, drawing together "the One" from Eleatic philosophy as explored in the *Parmenides* (Plato 2010, p. 105ff) with the "Good" of the *Republic* (Plato 1998, p. 233) into an ontological principle of unity. The *eidos* comes to signify what is ‚most being', the most perfect instantiation of a type. By contrast, materialism would posit the ground of being not in transcendent forms but in atoms that for all their materiality are no less removed from our experience. It also offers a radical equalization of kinds of being – we are all of the same stuff. Yet for both, substance is fundamentally unchanging, beyond appearance, and beyond interpretation.

An information-oriented category such as DNA is compelling to ontotheology because it manages to be at once form and matter, ideal template and material substrate. Indeed, it is this doubleness that characterizes the ontotheological claim of information. This allows it such mobility across areas of knowledge and, indeed, kinds of materiality (proteins, personality test responses, or particles).
*The ontotheology of the bit* would thus involve two complementary, though highly distinct, operations: reductionism (ultimately to an is/is-not function, the most elemental ontological statement recalling Heidegger's question: "Why are there beings at all, instead of Nothing?" (Heidegger 2000, p. 22) and an epistemic mobility or plurality, where the bit is applicable to different kinds of material and modes of knowing. These two operations may appear to be opposed: surely reductionism requires a single fundamental unit to which everything is to be reduced. The perennial complaint levelled by theorists of information against one another is that they lack a foolproof definition of ‚information'.[5] Information becomes a postulate or placeholder as much as a fully theorized object. Indeed, it is striking that the term used by both Norbert Wiener and Claude Shannon in their seminal contributions to information theory was not information at all, but ‚communi-

5 Burgin provides an extensive overview of disputes regarding the meaning of ‚information', and notes that the inability for the theory of information to agree on a satisfactory definition of its central term has hardly prevented its rapid growth (Burgin 2010, p. 2-24).

cation' (Shannon's 1948 paper was called "A Mathematical Theory of Communication," and the subtitle to Wiener's *Cybernetics*, also of 1948, was *Control and Communication in the Animal or Machine*): their primary interest was the mode of transfer, rather than the content transferred (Burgin 2010, p. 4–5; Koopman 2019, p. 18). But this is surely the source of its elegance, as well as its appeal: the term becomes more fungible, transferrable across disciplinary domains, but at the risk of the word ‚information' ending up the bearer of contradictory information.

For the remainder of this essay, I want to focus in on one area where this blend of reductionism and mobility has led to particular controversy, not to mention hand-wringing: the relatively recent concept of *personal data*. The ‚datafication' of experience, in which experience is supposedly captured, digitized, or ordered, could seem like a simple process of reductionism (or perhaps better, reductivism): turning the richness of subjective experience into binary code. Moreover, ‚big data' obtains its predictive power precisely through subsuming individual data points into mass trends and dissolving the boundaries between data subjects. Yet one might counter that the most salient feature of my experience as a (data) subject is that of ownership, that it belongs to me and that is therefore *mine*. This ‚mine-ness', incidentally, in fact raises further problems, and not only because the question who owns *data*, as opposed to experience, is the central faultline of political debates around surveillance and data privacy. Different conceptions of personhood, from the grammatically-derived category of the subject to the mathematical/logical categories of identity or individual to the ownership-oriented category of selfhood and the spatial model of interiority, continually blur in our debates, despite their profoundly different conceptualizations of what makes a person. I will return to this below.

For now, I will merely note that the sheer diversity of kinds of data generated – geolocation, internet browsing, social media likes, personality tests, medical and financial records, or driving habits – does retain something of the multifaceted nature of human experience: another instance of the unit of information holding together different kinds of information formalized into the apparently unidimensional status of binary code. The success of the *bit* as ontological unit lies in its versatility as well as its capacity seemingly to unify – but herein also lies the source of its challenge to some of the most longstanding beliefs (or articles of faith) we have regarding human personhood: another constellation of ontotheologics, in fact.

## 3. A person of bits/a bit of a person

To many, the reduction of individual personhood into binary code (however sophisticated and multiperspectival) is little short of sacrilege. It poses a radical philosophical challenge to a model of personhood oriented around what Kant termed the "unity of apperception" (Kant 1998, p. 236–238, 246–248 [A115–18, B131–36]) through which the manifold kinds of sensing and cognizing are unified into a single experience, and the experiencing subject can grasp themselves as a ‚self' who retains their identity over time. Yet the polemical tenor of much recent critical discussion of datafication reads less like philosophical argument than moral panic: in the phrase of the most prominent critic of data harvesting, at stake are "the moral imperatives of the autonomous individual" (Zuboff 2019, p. 327). In this way, the current polemics reveal a default model of selfhood itself reliant on ontotheological postulates, with the sovereign individual in the role of *θεός*.

The techno-optimist will argue that, as techniques of tracking, measuring, codifying, become more sophisticated, so the ‚person' will ultimately be perfectly ‚datafiable'. What one ends up with is an ontology of the person as an assemblage or network of all collectible knowledge of an individual's behavior, preferences, personality traits, conscious and unconscious opinions, mental biases and fallacies, and other such characteristics. In place of the ‚private' individual, with its unity of sensations and thoughts, its impregnable interiority, one has a radically exteriorized model of personhood as a kind of behavioral exoskeleton, knowable to data analysis far better than to one's own introspection or those of one's closest friends.[6]

There is an obvious riposte to this claim – that the tools themselves will create a simulacrum of personhood in line with the measurable: the view of the person that emerges is in fact simply an account of what the measurement sees. As the saying goes: to someone with a hammer, everything looks like a nail. The algorithm would, on this telling, simply be an especially sophisticated kind of hammer. Yet, for the purpose of ‚datafication' (the various processes and instruments through which we produce, and are configured as, ‚data'), it is not clear that one needs a reworked model of personhood at all. For all the hyperbolic claims of techno-optimists (and techno-catastrophists who share this tacit belief

**6** It is worth noting that, to the non-initiate at least, it is exceptionally hard to evaluate these claims, and they do tend to be written in a manner reminiscent as much of marketing copy as of scientific analysis – perhaps unsurprising, given that the research is undertaken by the same platforms that will use the research to sell their personalization tools.

in the tech's eventual capabilities), it is well known that ‚big data' analysis works by correlation rather than cause. If a correlation manages to predict behavior in a large enough proportion of causes, then the *why* of each individual case hardly matters. In other words, the truth of personhood is only of interest as a proxy for effective prediction and behavior-management tools.

At this point, it is worth noting that the most immediate threat is not so much metaphysical but political, concerning not personhood but power: one need only think of the racial profiling scandals that have beset big data analysis. Precisely because it is not concerned with the social causes of correlations between racialized populations and endemic poverty, say, or incarceration (to say nothing of programmers' blindness to structural racism), big data is liable to replicate and reinforce these causes (O'Neill 2017; Noble 2018). Zuboff also notes how behavior-tracking tools give rise to the "uncontract", in which we do not enter into contract with a service provider based on mutual trust, but rather allow them to track us and give them the capacity to unilaterally break off the contract whenever they deem, we have contravened its rules. We mere users do not have the same option: the result is a major asymmetry of power (Zuboff 2019, p. 334).

In this sense, the ‚person' as constructed by contemporary big data will reflect not simply the methods of data-analytics, but also its economic interests as a sector – biometric data for health insurance purposes, scrolling habits for advertising purposes, demographic data for the purposes of population-control. There's a feedback loop in which, as e.g. Google uses search terms to predict advertising needs, or Alexa listens in to our conversations for particular brands, so our online searches or our audible musings become more shopping-focused. It was recently reported that Amazon has patented a voice recognition technology that would allow an Echo smart speaker to recognize different emotions such as happiness, joy, anger, sorrow, sadness, fear, disgust, boredom, or stress, and to be able to tailor its responses to commands with targeted advertisements and promotions that appeal to those emotions (Moore 2021, p. 12). This is a vision of humanity not so much as *homo economicus* as *homo commoditus* (the link between the ‚commodity' of consumerism and ‚commodity' qua convenience seems particularly apt). But it would also imply that the surveillance capitalist (or indeed surveillance state) remains constitutively blind to those forms of desire that search for something other than consumer products. Hence the easy riposte: there's more to life in heaven and earth than is reckoned for in your philosophy, Amazon.

Zuboff's critique of surveillance capitalism inhabits a curious middle-ground between humanism and techno-optimism (or techno-catastrophism, which in its belief of the capacities of the ‚tech' amounts to the same thing). At times she maintains that the essential truth of being human cannot be captured by these tools,

that ‚personalization' will never fully grasp the self. At other times, however, she seems convinced that, in theory at least, all experience could be rendered as algorithms, and the privilege of interior selfhood would be dissolved. Yet even here there is a vacillation: the dystopian picture is of a stage of surveillance capitalism that "violates the inner sanctum as machines and their algorithms *decide* the meaning of my breath and my eyes" (Zuboff 2019, p. 291): but "decide" is difficult to parse. Does it mean that the algorithms impose an artificial meaning upon our inner sanctum (which disempowers us by disregarding the meanings we produce), or that our meanings are wholly subsumed into algorithmic predictive tools? On some occasions what we find is an insuperable problem, along the lines of the hammer-nail analogy: not only that what is datafiable is confused with what *is*, but also that the surveillance capitalists, with a business model so oriented around advertising and insurance revenues, skew their measurements towards market (and marketable) activity. Maybe this successfully manages to "kidnap behavioral surplus from the nonmarket spaces of everyday life where it lives" (Zuboff 2019, p. 183). Perhaps it simply reflects the biases of the market and offers a partial account of personhood, so whatever power asymmetries it facilitates, at least our "inner sanctum" remains unbreached.

Yet this can shape human behavior into the kind of person that reflects the data's biases, so the feedback loop becomes self-fulfilling, behavioral prediction becoming behavior-change. In other words, datafication does not simply translate or encode people into data, but orients people into subjects who produce data. Insofar as these products become parts of the world we navigate, so we will adapt our habits and desires. When a sphere of hitherto nonmarket activity is brought into market transactions, our relation to that activity itself is changed, its satisfaction is now mediated by, and quantified by, this market relation. We could think of the behavioral nudges of insurers – the health insurance premium only available if its health app tracks you making 10,000 steps per day or the driving insurance policy that takes data from your driving performance and sets its premium charges accordingly – which ‚nudge' you into being a healthier, safer insure. This is comparable to Facebook's notorious mass-psychology experiments (tweaking individuals' news feeds to examine the effect on their mood; see Zuboff 2019, p. 299–303; Debrabander 2020, p. 30). In reorienting our behavior to save money on our premiums, our lives become not just "progressively safer" but "more predictable – more conforming" (Debrabander 2020, p. 61), or in Zuboff's more dystopian vision, "docile members of a behaviorally purified society" (Zuboff 2019, p. 277). In this regard, insurance apps or the tracking tools that render us more ‚transparent' to advertisers and more active consumers, differ from the Social Credit System of the Chinese State in degree rather than kind. We are not just *data-producing subjects*, but *data-produced subjects*: subjects in the

sense of ‚subjection' more than in the sense of subjective agency. What would this ‚subject' look like?

## 4. Personhood/Personality/Personalization

Despite occasional waves of moral panic – be it over social media self-exposure, electoral manipulation, overreach of advertisers into non-market spaces, or the misuse of facial recognition technologies and GPS tracking by private security companies or the state – the various incursions into privacy have largely been met with public indifference. Indeed, even when people report unease with data harvesting, tracking tools, and ‚personalization'. This unease does not appear to translate into action (see Acquisti 2014, p. 85). But perhaps these are different expressions of the same basic reaction: incredulity at the proposition that personhood can be datafied.

After all, as Koopman says, "Our lives do not feel like information" (2019, p. viii). It seems incomprehensible that experience could be reduced to metadata and reconstructed from it (Debrabander 2020, p. 55; Barocas and Nissenbaum 2014, p. 54–55). This is exacerbated by the fact that, thanks to the internet, we are at our most surveilled when we are alone. Indeed, it is precisely browsing the internet as a solitary activity that can offer such insight into a person's state of mind. It is here that we expose aspects of ourselves, air views, or ask questions that we might otherwise hide in public.

This is not the only way in which the notion of being a ‚data subject' or ‚informational person' contravenes our most basic intuitions of our own subjecthood or personhood (as already noted, the slippage of categories itself raises several questions). As Barocas and Nissenbaum observe, most debate around privacy protections online focuses on the *name* (think of the EU's ruling on the ‚right to be forgotten' of the importance given to ‚anonymization' in datasets, or of the feeling of safety often presumed when using a pseudonym or avatar online.) But being nameless doesn't mean that one cannot still be reached by someone analyzing the data we produce. They conclude:

> [...] the value of anonymity inheres not in namelessness, and not even in the extension of the previous value of namelessness to all uniquely identifying information, but instead to ... 'reachability', the possibility of knocking on your door, hauling you out of bed, calling your phone number, threatening you with sanction, holding you accountable – with or without access to identifying information (Barocas & Nissenbaum 2014, p. 51).

This difficulty to think our status as ‚data subjects' comes despite the fact that we are so habituated to thinking of ourselves precisely in terms of the data associated with us: birth certificates, insurance numbers, driving licenses, passports, medical records, or other ‚vital statistics' (the word ‚vital' playing several roles in the euphemism) through which we navigate the administrative landscape of modern life. It is because ‚privacy harms' feel abstract to us that we become complacent about them.[7]

However, there is one intuition that does give on to a crucial feature of our intersection of experienced personhood and status as data-producing subjects: the sense that, when it comes to data harvesting, "many of us at least sometimes feel it's just icky to be watched and tracked" (Farrell 2012, p. 251). This reaction became so widespread that Tene and Polonetsky could describe the word "creepy" as "a term of art in privacy policy to denote situations where [social values and new technological capabilities] do not line up" (Tene & Polonetsky 2014, p. 60). Of course, "creepiness" might seem a rather indeterminate descriptor.

> When we say something is creepy, we mean to say we suspect it is wrong, or there is something potentially damaging or dangerous about it, but we are unsure what it is, and certainly cannot specify it (Debrabander 2020, p. 20).

But its language of abjection is fitting for a violation of boundaries between inside and outside that, we have seen, are so central to our humanist model of personhood. The ab-ject arises precisely when the colloquial boundary presumed between inside/outside is transgressed, and the values it regulates start to fall apart (as Kristeva notes, between sub-ject and ob-ject and thereby threatening the stability of this opposition; 1982, p. 1–2; on philosophical "creepiness" see also Kotsko 2015).

7 This, Barocas and Nissenbaum argue, gives the lie to any idea that one can calculate trade-offs between data privacy and accessing ‚personalized' services: because "data moves from place to place and recipient to recipient in unpredictable ways", when we give up our data we are effectively signing "a blank check" (Barocas and Nissenbaum 2014, p. 59). Compare this to Acquisti's ideal markets hypothesis: "When consumers are rational decision makers, a regulatory regime for privacy protection turns out not to be necessary […] [because] consumers who expect to be tracked can engage in strategic behaviors that render tracking counterproductive; to avoid this, firms must use consumer information to offer personalized services that consumers will value" (2014, p. 79). Given the asymmetry of knowledge and power, the ‚rational decision maker' is more likely to decide not to care because of the futility of doing so.

Here too, the intuition is oriented around *interiority*. From the famed declaration of *The Right to Privacy* from 1890 by Samuel D. Warren and Louis D. Brandeis to the recent polemics regarding surveillance capitalism and erosions of privacy online, the self is portrayed through an inner-outer model: privacy is subject to "invasion" (1890, pp. 198, 219); it must be "inviolate" (pp. 205, 211) or "impregnable" (p. 220). For Zuboff, as we have seen, data harvesting "violates the inner sanctum." Similarly, she defines the self as "the *inward* space of lived experience from which [...] meanings are created" (Zuboff 2019, p. 290). Privacy would marry a Cartesian model of inwardness with the enclosed space of the domestic sphere and, indeed, the devotional space of a personal relation to God (where the faith/works opposition maps onto private versus public expressions of religiosity).

Underpinning this model for Warren and Brandeis is the understanding of privacy resting on something even more fundamental than private property or conscience: "the principle [...] of inviolate personality" (1890, p. 205). "Personality" would describe the wholeness of the single person, a principle of demarcation and individuation; "the right to one's personality" is the same as "the right to the immunity of the person" (p. 207), and as such the principle of liberty itself. The change in the primary denotation of the word "personality" – from holistic personhood to assemblage of traits – offers a handy glimpse into how the production of data shapes concepts of personhood (again, not so much data-producing subject as data-produced subject). Not only is ‚personality trait' set up as something measurable, but something *external*. Whereas the "personality" posited by Brandeis and Warren is a wholly intangible and interior phenomenon, the ‚personality trait' is presumed fundamentally observable: a pattern of behavior rather than an inner quality.

Colin Koopman has traced the development of the notion of "personality," shaped in the first instance less by a vision of human selfhood than by the techniques and instruments of data-production and measurement: from indicators of intelligence or behavioral "abnormalities" comes a hypothesis of personhood. As Koopman notes, at first the personality theorists sought an existential basis for personality traits, with Gordon Allport, the "first grand technician of human personality" (Koopman 2019, p. 68), initially arguing that personality pairs such as ascension/submission (to use one of Allport's first extensive studies) are measured verifiable phenomena. Yet he was soon pointing to the internal consistency of the tests themselves: "[...] reliability was the crucial scientific achievement such that validity could be left to the side" (Koopman 2019, p. 92). So, it continues to this day: for the consumers of big data – governments, insurers, advertisers, health providers, lenders, etc. – this internal consistency will be enough to warrant using the tool. The ‚Big Five' personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism) are themsel-

ves reified as a transpersonal schema for our behavior. They bring ontotheologics into our behavior and dispositions, and become a catch-all description for social phenomena.[8]

The question here is not whether the ‚personality trait' describes a pre-existing phenomenon; it is whether it is efficacious. It is not considered effective in the sense of whether a particular personality-trait profile is so for "personalized" advertising or insurance premiums, but rather in the sense of personality traits becoming a kind of folk psychology that shapes behavior. The shift from the Warren-Brandeis model of ‚personality' to the trait-model of personality is not simply a conceptual shift, but a shift in *self-conceptualization*. As the language of personality is absorbed into our folk psychology, so too do we start to act in accordance with the personality traits we believe we have. Instead of being markers of behavior, they become parameters for behavior. Self-confirmation eventually becomes validity.

In this way, perhaps the question to ask is less: can a person be translated or encoded as data, but, more importantly, what happens when we start to depend on data to conceptualize ourselves? Perhaps the best example of this is the fashion for self-optimization. Self-improvement is hardly a new phenomenon, yet the use of tracking tools (step-counters, fitbits, etc.) that offer ever more sophisticated numerical measures is a recent development. The idea of ‚optimizing' rather than ‚improving' focuses us on the metric (walking more steps, having more uninterrupted sleep, having lower cholesterol, eating fewer calories, etc.), breaking down the self into these discrete measures so as to master one's self as a whole. The data-production is thus experienced as a source of liberation, of self-mastery, rather than subjection (unless it becomes the focus of addiction or self-alienation). For Tolentino, self-optimization is part of the endless task of "learning to get better at life under capitalism" (2019, p. 65). "Numbers" cease to be merely a metric and become something like *substance*: a real indicator of selfhood, somehow truer than self-perception ("numbers don't lie"). One can even easily envisage the aesthetics of this onto-theology of personhood: the sleek, minimalist, "wearable," or "personal assistant" whose inhuman look motivates us to be better humans.

Perhaps this signals a shift from data-*producing* subjects into data-*produced* subjects. In which case, it would corroborate Zuboff's dystopian vision: not that behavioral prediction tools so successfully describe our interior selves so

**8** One such instance is the analysis of the 2016 votes for Brexit and Donald Trump as a victory of ‚closed' personality traits over ‚openness,' thus redescribing the political realm, with all its contingency, as the expression of pre-political characteristics of individuals (see Kaufmann 2016).

effectively that it turns out we were *homo commoditus* all along; but that through the normalization of tracking tools, we are disciplined into finally becoming *homo commoditus*. It is not that all experience can be datafied, but that non-datafiable experience ceases to exist. While she notes that current tracking tools operate in precisely the opposite way to the panopticon (where the idea that we are constantly being surveilled changes our behavior), she fears that the next generation of smart devices will indeed operate like the panopticon. Of smart toys she warns: "Intimacy as we have known it is compromised, if not eliminated. Solitude is deleted. The children will learn first that there are no boundaries between self and market. Later they will wonder how it could ever have been different" (Zuboff 2019, p. 267). It is not for nothing that Zuboff's subtitle describes "the fight for a *human* future". But perhaps it simply shows a *fetishization* of data, regulating affects in accordance with the "regime of desire" of neoliberal capitalism (Lordon 2014, p. 50). The claims of data-science in this sense would be primarily an ideological one, naturalizing a socio-political system by its ontotheological claim.

## 5. The ‚private' person and private property

For Heidegger, ontotheology was to be understood from within the perspective of the "history of being" (Heidegger 2002, p. 60): the history of interpretations of being, but also the modes of historicity opened up by particular interpretations of being. The question is not to think *without* ontotheology, as if through sheer intellectual will we could step outside the historical conditions of our thought, but to trace the way ontotheologics pervades the categories and processes by which we think, and the historical unfolding of these categories and processes, so we might intuit that which remains unthought. The notion of ‚personal data' is so fraught in part, I have suggested, because of the unthought confluence of different models of personhood - the (grammatical) subject, the (proprietorial) self, the (logical) identity, the (mathematical) individual, and (spatial) interiority. It is this confluence of mutually converging but not wholly intersecting categories of personhood that the new construction of the ‚informational person' or ‚data subject' (data-producing, data-produced), in which the person is the nexus of different kinds of information, brings into crisis. If the response to the model of personhood as nexus of data is moral panic, this would indicate that our attachment to the model of personhood as subject-individual-self-identity that it displaces is a moral as much as epistemological attachment.

In this sense, the aim of the present essay has been first and foremost *diagnostic*: to identify the ontotheologics underpinning contemporary notions of

‚personal data', in whatever way that term is parsed, and however ‚personhood' is conceptualized or contested. That different models of personhood rely on different ontotheological presumptions, and indeed attachments, should not blind us to their shared reliance on ontotheology as a pattern of thought. Indeed, it is their ontotheologics that endows them with much of their intellectual and moral force. But this leaves a second, far longer task, where I have barely scraped the surface. This would be ‚historical' in a way that blends Foucauldian genealogy with the Heideggerian history of being.

To finish, I would like to sketch out, somewhat speculatively, this longer historical trajectory. The first aspect of this would be the confluence of different ways of thinking personhood (grammatical, proprietorial, spatial, numerical, logical), but the first would focus more specifically on *privacy* – itself the category most clearly in crisis today. What is happening now, I would suggest, is the untethering of two regimes of the private, which for centuries have been mutually sustaining and reinforcing: private property and private selfhood.[9] Emerging in the nexus philosophical interiority, a personal God, and mercantile capitalism, ‚privacy' is now threatened by the technological capabilities of data-surveillance and the transformation of experience into a raw material for producing value: it becomes the private property not of the experiencing person, the ‚data-producing subject', but rather of the data-extractor. What previously had provided the ideological justification for private property becomes, in Zuboff's phrase, mere "friction" obstructing the "free flow of property" (Zuboff 2019, p. 229). The ideal of *homo economicus* as the sovereign private individual is replaced by *homo commoditus* that, desiring only convenience and consumption, renounces its claim to individual sovereignty. It is in this sense little surprise that the reaction against incursions of privacy should read like so much bourgeois nostalgia.

But throughout this long period (which basically coincides with the history of "modern" philosophy) there has been an alternative reading of selfhood, based not on interiority but porosity; not on sovereignty, but on openness or ek-sistence in Heidegger. At a time in which the ontotheological claims of these two regimes of the private (private property and private selfhood) and the aesthetics they deploy, the fetishes they create and to which they appeal are so continually on display that we should excavate not only this notion of the private, but also those kinds of being, sensing, and desiring, that these regimes of the private continue to occlude.

**9** This distinction is similar to Debrabander‹s distinction between "privatism" and "privacy" (94), where by "privatism" he envisages the assertion of individualist values and private property over the common good.

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