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Chapter 8. The ethics of digital being: vulnerability, invulnerability, and ‘dangerous surprises’

Vincent Miller

Introduction

For roughly a year during 2015 and 2016, about once a month, my mobile phone would ring in the middle of the night. Waken from a deep sleep, without the presence of mind to screen the call, my answer would be greeted by a frantic voice shouting at me in French. Not being a French speaker (and particularly not in the middle of the night) the only word I would recognise in these tirades was ‘alarm’. Each call followed the same frustrating pattern of French tirade on their end, English tirade on mine, then me hanging up. More often than not, another call would follow shortly after which I wouldn’t answer, but the call logs listed these calls as either originating in France, or numbers that were ‘unknown’.

Over the following months, these calls continued periodically, and became progressively more annoying to me. I would angrily answer the calls, then, if the number was listed, send back Google-translated French language text messages saying not to call this number again and that I would call the police. The last call I received was in April 2016, when I was at a conference in San Francisco. Again it was a late night call. With all the bravado of

someone five and a half thousand miles away from their potential adversary, my end of the conversation consisted of a string of expletives followed by the statement “Do not phone me again, for the last time, you have got the wrong number!”.

“I don’t have the wrong number, Vince...”

Vince. Not Mr. Miller, Dr. Miller, or even Vincent, but Vince. Suddenly, these first words spoken in English in this set of exchanges changed them from something mildly annoying, to something more sinister and disturbing. How did this person from a place I haven’t visited in years know my name and number? Who do I know in France? What else do they know about me? What do they want? I hung up immediately with a heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach. This person, this stranger, located somewhere five thousand miles from me, had made me feel vulnerable. The calls have seemingly stopped now. But even as I write this in the late Autumn of 2016, I still wonder how these people in France got my number, let alone my name, and put the two together.

With a bit of academic reflective hindsight, one interesting thing for me about this set of interactions was the speed at which my state of being changed from an arguably hyper-aggressive stance enabled by a technology which placed me 3000 miles from my adversary, to a somewhat intense experience of vulnerability where that adversary seemingly knew a lot more about me than I knew about him. I felt somehow exposed and susceptible to something unknown, unexpected, and beyond my control.

Corporeal existence, some would argue, is defined by a stance of vulnerability and the anticipation of ‘dangerous surprises’ (Dreyfus, 2000; Merleau-Ponty, 1962). This is the understanding that the material world around us is full of potential hazards; that things can happen to us. Some of these, such as falling off a nearby cliff, or drowning in a river we are crossing, are more evident to us than others. However, part of having a body mean possessing

a background awareness that something, even something unexpected, could happen which we need to be ready for. The dangerous surprise could be a falling tree, a wild animal, or a lunatic waiting in the bushes, but having to look after a body means, to a certain extent, expecting the unexpected, to look for potential immediate threats.

A world of digital communications and digital presences at a distance complicates this. On the one hand, a world of far-reaching, mediated, often anonymous interactions can give us the impression of a lack of embodied vulnerability. When people are far away, we can become more brave, more willing to defend ourselves and others, become ‘keyboard warriors’. We can be more confident, more expressive of our opinions or our creative talents, or more brazen, by more actively pursuing flirtatious, romantic or sexual interactions, and even more aggressive and abusive, by engaging in acts of trolling, bullying, or other forms of harassment.

At the same time, our continuous, archived, digital presence, distributed in a multitude of networks, archives, databases and servers, opens us up to exposure to others of which, because they are not embodied or immediate, we are only partially aware. Indeed, the confidence and forthrightness, indeed, sense of invulnerability common to digital interactions belies a host of unknown ‘dangerous surprises’ created through an extension of exposure, both bodily and virtually, to unknown scales. These vulnerabilities become more apparent to us when we hear of, or are the victims of, a data breach, hacking scandal or other forms of ‘dangerous surprise’.

Using the work of Heidegger and other phenomenological, existential theorists, I argue that a defining feature of digital being thus consists of a contradictory stance to the world. First, a mediated, metaphysical outlook which encourages a stance of invulnerability in online social interactions. Such an outlook misapprehends our presence and fails to grasp our ontological status as both Dasein (beings in and of the world) and Mitsein (beings with and of each other).

Secondly, and paradoxically, an increased, yet less apparent, ontological vulnerability resulting from our continual, omnipresent online presence, manifest in constant connection to others and the ceaseless archiving of our data, actions and interactions. This means that we are increasingly, yet ambiguously, vulnerable to others through a continual ‘being with’ which has no time, space, or embodiment.

Using the examples of the five year trolling of Nicola Brookes, and the recent 2015 ‘Ashley Madison hack’, this paper will investigate the notion of vulnerability as one way to investigate being in the digital age (cf. Lagerkvist 2016). In particular, it will propose that the misapprehension of invulnerability online leaves us inevitably open to periodic ‘dangerous surprises’ which ultimately demonstrate the vulnerabilities we all share as part of digital human existence.

Vulnerable Being

As Harrison (2008) points out, vulnerability is largely unthought of within the social sciences. Indeed, vulnerability, when it is discussed, is conceived of as both a weakness and a contingent state which needs to be overcome or rectified. Thus, much effort in social science research is spent identifying ‘vulnerable people’ and how to protect them or change their vulnerable status in a given situation. This, of course, is compared to a kind of ideal state of ‘invulnerability’, or autonomy which arguably refers back to the legacy of Descartes-inspired modern philosophy and its conception of ‘being’ as a rational, autonomous, self-contained, metaphysical subject actively engaged with the ‘objective’ world around it (Harrison 2008). In such a conception, the subject (as a ‘mind’ or ‘psyche’) stands apart from the physical world of objects and bodies, and imposes its intentional, rational ‘will’ upon that world through the possession of a body. This view, labelled variously ‘mind/body dualism’, ‘metaphysical presencing’ or

‘essentialism’ was of course famously critiqued by Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Nietzsche, Derrida, Dewey and many others from phenomenological, existential and pragmatic traditions throughout the Twentieth Century. Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Nancy in particular argued that ‘being’ as such needs to be conceived of in inter-relation with, not in opposition to, the physical and social world in which we find ourselves. It is in such an inter-relation, where our being is open to the world and yet constructed in connection with that world, where vulnerability can be seen as part of the ontological experience of being human (see Butler 2004).

Being as existential exposure

The world of Dasein is a with-world. Being-in is Being-with Others (Heidegger, 1962, p. 155 original emphasis).

Although Heidegger is largely given credit for associating the essential relationship of ‘being-with’ to ‘being’, Pyyhtinen (2009) points out that Simmel (1908/1992) actually preceded Heidegger in suggesting that being-with-others was constitutive of ‘being’ itself. He quotes Simmel: ‘The human being is in one’s whole essence determined by the fact that one lies in reciprocal interaction with other people’ (Simmel, 1992, p. 15, cited in Pyyhtinen, 2009). For Simmel, even being ‘alone’ is a form of social interaction which invokes the lack of another’s presence where there has been previous meaningful and influential contact. Thus the being of an individual is something always and already constituted by others, thereby making others crucial in the structure of being (see also Lagerkvist, 2016).

Shortly after, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger argued that ‘Being-with’ (Mitsein) was part of the ontological existence of Dasein, or ‘Being-in-the-world’. This formed part of his

overall critique of metaphysical thinking in which he argued against the notion dominant in Western philosophic traditions of a self-enclosed, self-referential view of being as a transcendental thinking subject, or *res cogitans*: a ‘thinking thing’. Heidegger argued that humans are not these kind of abstracted ‘thinking things’ which stand apart from the world and contemplate it. Indeed, to conceive of humanity in this way is to misunderstand ‘being’. Instead, he posited that humans are ‘doing things’ that exist in and through bodies which have a relationship with the world and the things and beings in it. Selves and the world are thus co-constructed, and the world, far from a series of ‘objects’ to be contemplated from a distance by an abstract ‘subject’, transcendental ‘mind’ or ‘psyche’, is something in which beings are thrown, and something in which they dwell in a relationship of openness to, and engagement with, the world.

The logic, that an ‘individual’ should not be understood as something in isolation from the material world (in terms of ego, psyche etc), also applies to our relationship with other Beings in the world. The individual should not be understood in isolation from other Beings (*Daseins*), but as a part of the social world in which we are thrown and with which we continually engage (Cohn, 2002; Heidegger, 1987). The world is something that is shared with others in the sense that people (*Daseins*) exist in these spaces in propinquity; they dwell together in the same ‘Being-here’, not as one subject to another, but as co-dwellers opened up unto the world. So ‘being-with’ (*Mitsein*) is an ‘existential characteristic of *Dasein*’ (Heidegger, 1962, p. 155).

When we fail to acknowledge our being as something dependent on others, the meaning of being for Heidegger is obscured, but importantly, so is the relationship to the world and the others encountered in it (Sorial, 2004). The problem then becomes one of the kinds of ‘being-with’ we achieve with one another. When we (encouraged by Cartesian-esque metaphysical thinking) see ourselves as self-enclosed subjects or ‘I’s’ not really a part of that world, we

become alienated from ourselves, others, and the world. The obscured relationship to others that results from terms of their being-with, Heidegger (1962) referred to as a 'deficient' form of solicitude, where we engage in a 'being against or without', 'passing by', or 'not mattering' towards one another (Bauer, 2001, p. 136; Cohn, 2002, p. 37).

Mitsein provides a contrast with the alienated, metaphysical 'I', with a recognition of fellowship and mutual dependence, but with a tension of potential subsumption of one's unique authenticity into what Heidegger calls 'das man' ('the they'), where we can lose ourselves in the undifferentiated will of masses, or fail to be recognised as unique beings in our own right (Bauer, 2001).

Recognising this tension, Jean-Luc Nancy (2008) argues that Heidegger never fully articulated the 'with' in 'Being-with', even though that had been characterised as essential for Dasein's existence. Nancy (2008) squarely addresses this 'shortfall in thinking' in Heidegger's notion of 'Being-with' by using Heidegger's being-with ontological status as a springboard to develop his notion of 'Being-singular-plural'. For Nancy, this is a way of conceptualising the complex relationship between unique individual beings and their communal co-construction with others (2008; 2000).

Nancy (2000) uses this concept to retain the idea that the uniqueness or alterity of each bodily being matters, and that each being is unique in terms of their face, voice, gestures, comportment, yet at the same time acknowledging that what it is to 'be' as a human by necessity exists as something that is shared, because meaning itself is something that can only come into existence through sharing or exposure. According to Willson (2012), the essence of being-singular-plural is the inevitable and transient exposure to one another. Willson herself suggests the terms 'exposures' or 'events' as in many ways preferable to 'being' as they more accurately depict Nancy's conception of what it is to exist in common with others¹. It is that mutual

exposure to one another which preserves the existence of an 'I' in the face of the commonality of a 'we'. Thus 'being-with' for Nancy, is 'the exposure of singularities' (Nancy, 1991, p. 30).

Emmanuel Levinas also emphasises the fundamentally relational character of human existence and the entangled condition of inter-relation with other humans as one of exposure and vulnerability. Levinas (1985, 1969) argued, to be human is to always already find oneself connected in relationships with others which we cannot define or control (Groenhout 2004). Indeed, it is the intersubjective encounter of the other, an exposure to the other, which, for Levinas, is the first and primary human encounter which ultimately constitutes human subjects. In this respect, it is our relational existence which makes vulnerability to others an ontological part of the human condition. For Levinas, this vulnerability is manifest in terms of a fundamental burden of ethical responsibility. That is, exposure to the 'face' of the other 'calls' or 'makes moral demands' of the subject to acknowledge and care, or to abandon or harm:

‘There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me’ (Levinas, 1985, p. 89).

Indeed, the face of another is something which presses upon us. Where we generally engage the presence of, say, rocks or trees or other objects in the world with a 'passing-by' (to use Heideggerian terminology) because they do not present 'face' to us, by contrast, other humans tend to bring us into engagement. We are drawn to them because their uniqueness as other persons brings their ultimately unknowable and uncontainable otherness to us. It demonstrates to us our limitations, that we share the world, that we are not able to do simply as we please, that we are connected.

Being as embodied exposure

For Nancy, both the singularity of being and the commonality of meaning centre around the body, as it is the traits and capacities of the body which mark us out as singular within the proximity of other embodied beings which recognise its meaningful singularity through apprehension of a unique body, thereby bringing it into existence. Levinas, refers to the embodied, face-to-face encounter as the primary encounter constitutive of human subjectivity. The face of the other, on whom our being is dependent and who we are called to responsibility for or to care for, is a physical entity with physical and emotional needs (Groenhout, 2004). As a result, human existence is not only defined relationally, but is dependent on that embodied relation to others.

To be a human body is to be physically vulnerable, and awareness of such vulnerability is part of our ontological condition. Of course, all bodies themselves are vulnerable to the physical hazards and threats encountered in the material world as well as the potential hazards involved in being in proximal relations with others. For Butler (2004, p. 29), the vulnerability of bodily life is the realisation of vulnerability to a 'sudden address from elsewhere'. As beings with bodies, we have a sense of exposure to the unpredictable, the unchosen, and the unforeseen. Such a sense is part and parcel of our encounter with others (Harrison 2008). We need others to exist, yet this exposes us to them. This understanding of our limits and vulnerabilities affords us a certain wariness as we make our way through the world. Indeed, as Dreyfus (2000) suggests, the sense of risk, endemic to embodied life, provides us with a sense of the 'realness' of the world around us. Borrowing from Merleau-Ponty's use of *urdoxa* as a kind of 'background readiness', it is this constant readiness towards things such as 'dangerous surprises', or a general readiness to 'get a grip' in any particular situation² which helps us make sense of the reality of the world.

However, while vulnerability may be a part of the human condition, what constitutes a 'threat' and the awareness of vulnerability itself is less universal. Feminist scholarship explores

vulnerability further by, on the one hand, acknowledging the shared, ontological and existential vulnerability of humans as living beings exposed to potential harm, injury and inevitable death, and, on the other, by highlighting the fact that while it may be a state shared among all humans, the experience of vulnerability is not equal (Page, 2016, p. 25). As Butler (2004) suggests, vulnerability is a universal condition with an uneven distribution ([see also Schwartz in chapter three of this volume](#)).

These scholars emphasise the distinction between universal conditions and particular circumstances (Fineman, 2008; Page, 2016), or similarly the difference between ‘precariousness’ and ‘precarity’ (Butler, 2009), or between the ‘possible’ or condition of vulnerability, and the ‘actual’ or experience of, vulnerability (Gilson 2014). In this way, feminist scholars are able to discuss vulnerability as an ontological condition, but also the specific political and social contexts in which vulnerable bodies are a site of politics (Berghoffen, 2003). This allows them to emphasise the uneven nature of vulnerability for women, LGBT persons, and ethnic minorities³.

Online Mitsein, Digital Urdoxa and Dangerous Surprises

The ontological notion of being as embodied and relational means that vulnerability is not a weakness or a condition to be overcome, but is part of the ontological condition of human existence (Harrison, 2008; Lagerkvist, 2016). Indeed, vulnerability ‘is the inherent and continuous susceptibility of corporeal life to the unchosen and unforeseen... its inherent openness to what exceeds its abilities to contain and absorb’ (Harrison, 2008, p. 427). As embodied, corporeal beings, we are always left exposed, susceptible to the natural and social world of other humans around us to which we are intimately connected, but yet exceed our capabilities of control.

Through existential connectedness to others, and through having bodies which are open to the world and its dangerous surprises, vulnerability is an inherent part of the human condition. But what happens online when our social encounters are more numerous and interconnected yet separated from our embodiment?

Clearly, the notion of 'being-with' takes on a new relevance in digital culture. With a little thought, the co-construction of self and world becomes more evident when we recognise the complex, structureless, interconnecting, indeed rhizomic machinations of our digital existence as articulated by writers such as Bernard Stiegler (1998, 2008) (in terms of, for example, the exteriorisation of desire into digital technologies) and Brian Rotman (2008), who both conceive of contemporary human being as an assemblage of bodies and technologies which include data, profiles, avatars, images, databases which are stored on a vast array of networked servers and distributed around the world. As Rotman suggested, 'it is harder and harder to say where the world stops and the person begins' (Rotman, 2008, p. 8).

Our being is data-encumbered, and in that sense, conceptually at least, we can imagine the collapse of the metaphysical Cartesian self which separates the subject from object. As Coté (2014) suggests, 'the capturing of data is not something that happens to us; it is constitutive of our being as digital humans' (Coté, 2014, p. 14). Our digital selves exist in and through relationships with other digital things and beings. A social networking profile, for example, cannot be meaningfully conceived of in isolation as an individual, self-contained 'thing', given that its existence is dependent on connection and interaction with other profiles, as well as the networked databases, image banks, hyperlinks, and even material bodies which are assembled into what we perceive as the singularity or continuity of 'the profile'.

Mitchel (2014) argues that the spatial technologies of connection and the temporal technologies of archiving have created a digital lifeworld of archival subjects, giving the things

and beings present online a perpetual ready-to-hand quality in Heideggerian terms, defying both space and time. The temporally fleeting contact of the embodied proximal or face-to-face interaction in terms of touch, gesture, gaze, conversation, becomes a matter or record in online contexts. For example, the timelessness of archival subjects, their actions, and their interactions (constituted in the form of both known and unknown presences, such as profiles, databases, conversations, search histories, purchase histories, browsing histories and the like) marks out a fundamental difference between online and offline in terms of Being or 'Being-with'. Whereas our embodied exposures to others are usually tied to the moment of encounter, a moment circumscribed in time and space, our archived presence extends the digital moment of encounter to any time or any place. Thus we are always already present to others in the networked traces of ourselves. We therefore potentially and unknowingly encounter any other, anywhere, all the time.

Indeed, I have suggested elsewhere (Miller, 2016), one key problem in contemporary culture is that the Web, as currently manifest with its distanced, mediated and (largely) disembodied interactions, plays into the hands of metaphysical thinking by allowing us (through processes of networking and archiving) to achieve a kind of omnipresence in time and space which is beyond the body as we currently understand it. This, I argue encourages a metaphysical outlook which is more akin to the self-enclosed, self-referential, and ultimately, alienated 'thinking thing' of Descartes *res cogitans*. Such an 'I' tends to set the world and the things and people in it at a distance from itself, and ironically, such an outlook juxtaposes a world in which we are increasingly interconnected through technologies. Thus, I suggested that digital culture is paradoxically potentially moving us further away from understanding ourselves ontologically as interconnected with the world⁴ (*Dasein*) and each other (*Mitsein*), and that this misunderstanding or alienation has articulated itself in a series of ethical crisis

(such as controversies around abusive behaviour, privacy, speech) which have become endemic to the internet.

In what follows, I will present two online incidents which demonstrate how this misunderstanding of our ontological status manifests itself in terms of a heightened impression of invulnerability in online social encounters with others, yet paradoxically led to intense experiences of vulnerability to a host of unexpected ‘dangerous surprises’.

The trolling of Nicola Brookes – or *‘Happy Christmas to a dog’*

In early November, 2011, a teenage contestant on the popular UK talent show The X-Factor, Frankie Cocozza, left the programme amidst allegations of drug use. The X-Factor Facebook page soon filled with hostile comments and criticism of Mr. Cocozza. Dismayed by what she had seen, a 45 year-old mother from Brighton, UK, decided to intervene with some words of encouragement: ‘Keep your friends and your family close, Frankie. They’ll move on to someone else soon’ (Carey, 2012)⁵. This proved to be both a prophetic and pivotal moment in Ms Brookes’ life, as this intervention turned the focus of attention onto herself, with personally devastating consequences.

Within hours, over a hundred abusive messages were directed at her on the X-Factor page, her own Facebook page had been cloned and was sending abusive and paedophilic messages to young women on Facebook in her name. Other fake accounts were set up in both her and her daughter’s name, filled with photoshopped, sexualised images of them both. Websites were created which warned the public of her ‘fake’ battle with Crone’s disease, as well as accusing her of being a drug dealer, prostitute and paedophile. Such claims drew in others (under false pretences) to join in the malicious comments and threats, escalating the

intensity and scope of harassment, as well as the wider damage to her reputation. Months later, her home address was published online, prompting worries about physical threat (she began to sleep with a knife under her pillow). She subsequently received 'snail mail' harassment as well, including a Christmas card featuring a picture of a dog, and the caption 'Happy Christmas to a dog'. In the card, there was a post-operative photo of her taken from her daughters Facebook page (Naked Security 2013), neatly tying together the relationship between her digital and embodied vulnerability.

In her own personal and legal accounts of the unfolding events, it was Nicola Brookes' desire to 'answer back' which helped to escalate a minor trolling incident into a fully-blown campaign of online harassment which lasted for five years and spread into offline contexts. Indeed, the UK Crown Prosecution Service refused to bring charges to her assailants, as they suggested that, against police advice, she actively engaged with trolls and thus there was no realistic chance of prosecution (Naked Security 2013). No charges have ever been brought against any of her harassers.

On the one hand, this can be seen as 'blaming the victim'. People should have a right to defend themselves and others. However, in offline, embodied contexts, such disputes usually dissipate as both parties possess an urdoxic awareness of one's vulnerability to a 'sudden address from elsewhere', or 'a dangerous surprise', should things escalate. Bodies encountering each other in such circumstances would be guarded by the realisation of a potential escalation to a physical altercation. Women, being familiar with their ontological vulnerability to physical threat from men, would (for better or worse) likely be more wary of intervention. Men, perhaps more aware of the social stigma and recrimination of a physical altercation with a woman in public, would likely be more wary of escalation.

The Nicola Brookes case demonstrates where things can go when there is no embodied vulnerability in an encounter. It demonstrates a misunderstanding of online existence, which continually exposes us, not just to a presence tied to the time and place of encounter, but to an always-already presence with others in the networked traces of ourselves across multiple locations contexts. Thus, Ms Brookes' dispute with her antagonisers would not be contained to the X-Factor Facebook page, but would follow her online presence across the Web, to her family, and eventually to her home address over the course of five years. At the time of her first encounter, such a life-changing potentiality would have been difficult to imagine.

Online Mitsein and vulnerability: the Ashley Madison hack

Hello [name redacted], you don't know me but I know you very well. As you likely know, the Ashley Madison website was hacked a little while back and in the process some personal information from tens of millions of their clients was compromised. As scary as that sounds, most of their families will never find out. First, they would have to actively seek out the information. Second, the files containing the information are multiple gigabytes in size and are not all that convenient to access if you don't know how. There will be some spammers who shoot out mass threatening emails to those on the lists but they can safely be ignored. Only the unlucky few will draw the attention of a true blackmailer willing to actually research a target's family and acquaintances. Unfortunately, [name redacted], you are one of the unlucky ones.

Yes, I know about your secret, that you paid for services from a company that specializes in facilitating adultery. But what makes me a threat to you is that I have also spent several days getting to know about you, your family and others in your life. All you have to do in order to prevent me from using this information against you, [name redacted], is to pay me

\$2000. And before you ignore this letter consider this: You received this via first class mail. It wasn't a spam email some Nigerian sent to thousands of people. That means I spent money on it. It means I took extensive counter-forensics measures to ensure the Postal Inspector would not be able to track it back to me via post marks or via prints and DNA. It means I *paid cash for a printer that couldn't be traced back to me. I have spent considerable time and money on you, [name redacted]. So if you decide to ignore me, you can be certain that I sure as hell won't ignore you.* (Sample blackmail letter from Cluley, 2016).

Ashley Madison, is dating website which specialises in bringing together married persons who are looking for illicit liaisons outside of their marriage or relationship. The premise of its business is that it provides a safe, discreet and confidential means for engaging in such activities without risking ones relationships, family life and reputation, which is more likely to be the case if one attempts such activities among members of their own community or immediate social circle.

On July 12, 2015, employees of Avid Life Media, owners of Ashley Madison Ashley Madison turned on their office computers and were greeted by the familiar chords of the AC/DC song 'Thunderstruck', and a message from a hacker group calling itself 'The Impact Team':

'We are the Impact Team. We have taken all systems in your entire office and production domains, all customer information databases, source code repositories, financial records, e-mails...'

It went on to say that if Ashley Madison and partner website Established Men were not shut down immediately, the hackers would release to the public all customer records, including profiles, sexual preferences and fantasies, chat records, pictures and credit card data (including real names and addresses), as well as employee documents and e-mails, causing irreparable

harm not only to Avid Life Media, but to the millions of customers (mostly men) who, under assurances of discretion and anonymity, had used the site.

The ethical reasoning behind the attack was twofold. First, the Impact Team took offence at the idea that Ashley Madison was engaged in the morally dubious business of encouraging extra-marital affairs. Secondly, the Impact Team took issue with the ethically reprehensible business practices of the website, for example, in not properly encrypting customers' data and financial transactions, and also falsely offering a \$20 'full delete' service (in which all of their data would be deleted from Ashley Madison databases) to customers which was never fulfilled. In addition, the website was actively engaged in grossly exaggerating the number of female users on the site by creating fake profiles ('bots'), which encouraged men to join and pay for the service under false pretences. In the eyes of the Impact Team, the fraudulent behaviour of Avid life Media was as morally problematic as the idea of a 'cheating website' itself.

The moral and ethical questions around these events are intriguing and complex, and a discussion of these larger questions remains outside the remit of this chapter. What we do know is that in mid-August, when Avid Life Media refused to shut down Ashley Madison, the Impact Team followed up on their threat and posted large amounts of the leaked data on the 'Dark Web'. From this point on, those who had data on the site now faced the threats of exposure, embarrassment, blackmail, threats to employment and marital breakdown.

This is exactly what happened. Soon after, search sites sprang up where one could simply type in an e-mail address of a partner, friend, neighbour, or work colleague and would indicate whether or not that e-mail had been associated with a profile on the site. This did not necessarily mean that the person in question had contacted anyone or even actively used the site, indeed, since Ashley Madison did not utilise e-mail verification, so anyone could have

used any e-mail address to create a profile, but the implication of at least an interest in infidelity was there. Famously, one Australian breakfast radio programme provided that service live on air, letting one female caller know that her husband's e-mail had come up on their search (Guardian 2015).

Local blogs, newspapers and Twitter feeds, particularly in the US 'deep south' engaged in 'name and shame' campaigns published the names of local residents found on the database, sometimes ordering them by postcode so anyone could know who in the vicinity was a potential cheater. The damage to reputations and the amount of marriage break-ups resulting from the hack goes unmeasured and untold, as does the amount of persecution received by those in countries such as Saudi Arabia, where adultery and homosexuality are illegal and punishable by severe sentences, even death. However, we do know that Toronto police linked two suicides with the data leak in Canada (Mansfield-Devine 2015). A police officer in Texas, and a Pastor in New Orleans had also taken their own lives as a result (Segall 2015⁵; Waugh 2015).

Many of those fortunate enough not to have been publically 'outed' faced blackmail, and through the latter months of 2015, dozens of nefarious groups and individuals e-mailed extortionate messages to those on the database demanding bitcoin deposits under threat of exposure to friends and family (Brown 2015a). Several security websites reported thousands of dollars in Bitcoins collected by blackmailers. One website (Meulle 2015/2016) listed eight Bitcoin wallets used in blackmail attempts, and a check by this author counted 108.2 Bitcoins collected across these eight accounts, equating to roughly \$44000 USD⁶, proving that, at least some of the time, crime does pay. Several months later, defying expectations and the conventional wisdom that internet blackmailers never make good on their threats, some in America followed through, sending 'snail mail' letters to the home addresses and wives of some men on the list, exposing their secret (Murgia 2016).

Conclusion

‘I still am looking over my shoulder, and know that it will never go away’² (Brown 2015b, e-mail correspondence with Ashley Madison hacking victim⁷)

The world, when it includes the online, truly is a ‘with-world’, as our selves are always ready-to-hand for others in a kind of continual online *Mitsein* which continually exposes us to others, yet is also the fabric of online being. Such exposures often occur without our knowledge, as a lack of embodied *urdoxic* awareness of such connections obscures the exposures and vulnerabilities which are part and parcel of our existence.

Feminist critiques, such as those encountered earlier in the chapter, demonstrate that while we are all vulnerable to ‘dangerous surprises’ it is women who are particularly aware of the ontological status of vulnerability as a condition of life. Nicola Brookes’ experience as a trolling victim demonstrated how these ‘dangerous surprises’ can emerge from the most innocuous circumstances. Circumstances that, nonetheless, would have played out in a completely different matter had they involved the interaction of material bodies. If Dreyfus (2000) suggests that the sense of risk, endemic to embodied life, provides us with a sense of the ‘realness’ of the world around us, the lack of risk perceived in online encounters puts us in a position where we not only distance ourselves from the ‘reality’ of our actions online, but lose the ‘wariness’ of embodied life. The perceived lack of embodied vulnerability in the interactions of both Nicola and her tormentors allowed a minor dispute to escalate into ridiculous proportions, eventually spilling out from the virtual to the material and embodied.

By contrast, the men on Ashley Madison joined a site advertising discretion and confidentiality, providing them the assurance that they could safely engage in activities that

were outside the ethical and moral codes of their immediate relationships and communities. The presence of their data, perhaps lying dormant for over a decade, would have hardly occurred to them outside of their own use of it. They had no reason to expect that their actions would make their way into the public realm, connecting them to a world of hacktivists, bloggers, news agencies and blackmailers, ultimately returning to their own doorsteps in some cases. Many of those who have not been publically exposed still carry the feeling of vulnerability and angst epitomised in the quote above. The hack, and the events that followed, demonstrated that vulnerability does not just apply to traditionally ‘vulnerable’ groups, but illuminates the wider ontological vulnerability at the core of digital existence itself: the openness inherent in a connected world, where selves extend in unforeseen directions, creating unanticipated presences which bring contact and exposure with unimagined others.

The theme of vulnerability not only speaks to the specific instance of men caught using an infidelity website, but is something that is endemic to all of us in a contemporary digital culture. Ceaseless networking, archiving, and leaks of data mean that we are all connected and thus exposed, in a myriad of profiles, accounts, archives, databases and servers, and in a multitude of unexpected ways. Ohm (2010) refers to the potential harm caused by the worldwide accretion of data as a potential ‘database of ruin’. He suggests that:

Almost every person in the developed world can be linked to at least one fact in a computer database that an adversary could use for blackmail, discrimination, harassment, financial or identity theft (Ohm, 2010, [p.](#) 1748).

The vulnerability of these online aspects of self become more present at hand to us when we hear of, or are the victims of, a data breach, identity theft, extortion, late night phone calls from France, or a gang of internet trolls. Incidents such as these illustrate the contradictory stance of digital being: of heightened invulnerability in our social encounters with others, alongside a

heightened vulnerability to a host of unknown ‘dangerous surprises’ or ‘sudden addresses’ from elsewhere.

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Notes

¹ For Willson, the 'singular' being ends at the moment of encounter with other beings. This is the point where a single being has cause to question and acknowledge its own and other's existence (Willson 2012:286).

² This is, for example, articulated in the heightened awareness of potential threat we might feel in a dark alley or walking past a group of overly intoxicated people on a night out.

³ This allows Bergoffen (2003) for example to challenge cultural and legal assumptions of the body (particularly in terms of the idea of 'consent') as autonomous and invulnerable as part of a kind of fallacious, masculine cultural ideal (Page 2016).

⁴ [For another discussion of the role of social software in the becoming of oneself and encounter with the world, see Langois, chapter seven in this volume.](#)

⁵ Other articles have varying versions of this statement.

⁶ In November 2015 value as depicted by *Yahoo UK finance* (<https://uk.finance.yahoo.com/quote/BTCUSD=X?ltr=1>).

⁷ Located at: <http://fusion.net/story/242502/ashley-madison-hack-aftermath/>