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## The Lack of Consciousness of the Presence of the Other in Contemporary Society in the Era of Mass Digitalization

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**Abstract.** This study discusses how the substantial development of technology, especially of social media platforms, in the past decades has altered the conditions that determine human relationships radically. It provides an overview of how emerging technologies have affected interpersonal human relationships by creating a new environment in which communication takes place, which could be exclusively virtual in the future. Then, it touches on the Levinasian theory regarding the self and its constant consciousness of the Other and aims to explore how Levinas's theory relates to modern society. It highlights the process of how each person strives to find the Other during his/her existence but is often unable to do that and how, in this process, contact with the Other is essential. It is explained that Levinas stresses the importance of meeting with the Other but indicates that we often fail to do so and end up meeting with the Third, an unoriginal form of the Other. Lastly, it is hypothesized that the inability to find the Other in the modern world can be linked to the development of digitalization because new media are often responsible for creating distance in human relationships and, therefore, cannot be the sole medium of creating relationships with others as face-to-face communication and meeting the other are essential components of developing a meaningful relationship with them.

**Keywords:** self, human relationships, Emmanuel Levinas

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## Неосознанность присутствия Другого в современном обществе в эпоху массовой цифровизации

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**Аннотация.** Обсуждается, как существенное развитие технологий, особенно платформ социальных сетей, в последние десятилетия радикально изменило условия, которые очень сильно влияют на человеческие отношения. Представлен обзор того, как новые технологии повлияли на межличностные человеческие отношения, создав новую среду, в которой происходит общение и которая в будущем может стать исключительно виртуальной. Затем рассматривается теория Левинаса о личности и ее постоянное сознание Другого с точки зрения того, как теория Левинаса связана с современным обществом. В этой теории освещается процесс того, как каждый человек в течение своего существования стремится найти Другого, но часто не может этого сделать, и насколько важен в этом процессе контакт с Другим. Объясняется, что Левинас подчеркивает важность встречи с Другим, но указывает, что мы часто не делаем этого и в конечном итоге встречаемся с Третьим, неоригинальной формой Другого. Наконец, выдвигается гипотеза, что невозможность найти Другого в современном мире может быть связана с развитием цифровизации, поскольку новые медиа часто несут ответственность за создание дистанции в человеческих отношениях и, следовательно, не могут быть единственным средством создания отношений с другими людьми. Поскольку личное общение и встречи друг с другом являются важными компонентами развития значимых межличностных отношений.

**Ключевые слова:** Я, человеческие отношения, Эммануэль Левинас

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### Introduction

In this study, my main goal is to address how the development of technology has affected human relationships by creating new digital spaces that have altered the framework in which communication occurs. I will start by addressing the changes that have occurred over the last few decades, many of which have positively affected our lives. I will continue by addressing the challenges brought to human relationships because of social media platforms, such as the uneasiness of communicating face-to-face with other individuals or the underdevelopment of an understanding of reading social cues. I will then move on to emphasize key

points in the theory of Emmanuel Levinas, as presented in his book *Entre Nous*, regarding the need of the self to seek the Other and communicate with him. Lastly, I will link these ideas to the challenges in modern-day relationships and how social media. At the same time, helpful at many times, is often counterproductive in the effort to connect with others.

### **Social Networks: Benefits and Challenges**

One of the most exceptional changes humans have faced in the light of technological advancements is the effect of mass digitalization on their interpersonal relationships. It would be naive to believe that human relationships can remain unaffected by the growth of technology. Modern devices, gadgets, and social media are gradually reshaping how we communicate and interact with others. They create new concepts of friendship and intimacy that would have been unimaginable a few decades ago. Nevertheless, while technology creates new opportunities and possibilities for relationships, digitalized relationships can in no way act entirely as a substitute for conventional face-to-face interpersonal relations. This study will explore how the new media have affected our relationships, how they can be used to aid them, and why they cannot become the sole medium through which human interactions occur.

Social networking sites have now existed for almost two decades. They have become an established mode of communication worldwide. To name just a few of the networking platforms, Facebook<sup>1</sup>, Twitter, and Instagram<sup>2</sup> are used by millions worldwide to interact with people worldwide. Facebook<sup>3</sup>, e.g., states that it “helps you connect and share with the people in your life.” Deborah Chambers claims that it is believed that social networks result in an increase in the number of friends people have and that they are strengthening the ties between friends and families [1. P. 2].

Social networks and technology manage something that even public means of transport cannot offer in a way: they break down communication barriers because of physical proximity. It is possible to have a conversation with a friend who lives in a different city and then, the very next moment, proceed to have an international meeting with people from all over the world through a group video chat. This can be especially true in the cases of immigrants whose only medium of communication with their loved ones is such platforms or in those who have moved to different places for either professional or educational purposes. Technology and social networks can significantly assist people because they permit them to maintain their bond with others who live miles away. This concept would have been unfathomable before. In the last two decades, a significant amount of studies have focused on the role of technology in romantic relationships that are maintained over long distances,

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<sup>1</sup> Продукт компании Meta, признанной экстремистской организацией и запрещенной в РФ.

<sup>2</sup> Продукт компании Meta, признанной экстремистской организацией и запрещенной в РФ.

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and they have indicated that generally, couples positively view social networks and technology as they allow them to maintain their relationship. A good example would be Kirk Allie's research on undergraduate students who, at large, seemed to associate direct communication channels, such as Skype, with relational satisfaction [2. P. 4—6].

This is per Tsai and Tsai, who suggested that video conferencing makes face-to-face communication possible. In that way, it facilitates feelings of connectedness while at the same time effectively reducing the feeling of loneliness and the possibility of presenting signs of depression [3. P. 1538—1539]. This would explain why, even though long-distance communication has been possible through telephone calls and, later on, emails, it is now that further technological leaps have occurred that sustaining relationships over a long distance is a realistic option.

At the same time, technological evolution has proven to be highly significant for human relationships in times of crisis. The recent COVID-19 global crisis, which affected hundreds of countries around the world during 2020, confirmed that the use of technology in order to communicate with family members who are in poor health and therefore at possible risk of being visited in person may indeed be the answer as to how one can maintain interpersonal relationships when face-to-face communication is not a viable option. Even in cases of younger people or family members who were not at immediate risk but still preferred to stay safe by self-isolating, digital interactions became far more common. By surveying Italy during the March 2020 lockdown, psychologists found that the increased number of interactions was related to decreased feelings of anger/irritability and loneliness by increasing the sense of belongingness for many people [4. P. 2]. In this case, digital technologies are seen as having a substantially positive role in a particularly challenging situation for human relationships.

All of the above are most likely why adherents support the idea that social networks and technology positively impact our lives. Yet, at the same time, network sites are constantly accused of promoting isolation and relationships that are not “deep” or “honest”. Nancy Baym suggests the belief that digital relationships are inferior to those based on face-to-face interaction [5. P. 22, 24]. Thus, digitalized relationships are often blamed for a deterioration in morals, family values, and, most significantly, traditional modes of socializing. Sarvamangala supports this idea by explaining how, in the modern world, it is not uncommon to find people who feel more closely connected to their mobile phone devices than to actual humans [6. P. 2—3].

Indeed, teenagers and young adults raised during those immense technological leaps have often been accused of being overly focused on their digital lives and relationships and not committed enough to their physical surroundings and interactions. Valkenburg, Peter, and Schouten have indicated that teenagers often seem to have trouble communicating their thoughts and feelings as their social skills are underdeveloped and their self-esteem is affected; as a result, they show a tendency to prefer to relate to other people through social media [7. P. 589]. This

virtual environment, which feels foreign and strange to older generations, has become a safer space for younger ones, who feel more capable of interacting through it than in real-life social situations where communication is more direct.

The present-day reality would seem like a science-fiction movie scenario a couple of decades ago, but the truth is that the Internet has radically reshaped the world we live in. In an article published in 2011, Arnold Brown explored the possibilities of online dating, an industry that at the time was worth billions of dollars in the United States of America and is still thriving a decade later [8. P. 29—30]. These online dating services can range from the most basic ones that match people based on their online profiles and a list of their preferences and interests to sites that allow people to go on actual online dates where they can “meet” without actually meeting in person or leaving the safety of their own homes. This mode of interaction allows flexibility, ease, and, in most cases, anonymity. However, two of the most critical aspects of the appeal of online relationships are the lack of commitment and the awareness of a plethora of available options on the spot. Platforms that are used by millions of users create the illusion that one does not need to compromise in any way when it comes to a relationship—you can always abort the mission at any time and look for someone who is a much better fit for you.

Does the possibility of this new normal mean that human relationships could become exclusively virtual in the not-so-distant future, and mass digitalization leads to eliminating immediate interpersonal relations? The present situation would indicate that, albeit sounding like a movie scenario, it is entirely possible as we have the means to achieve it. The most important question, however, is, should we? Modern philosophy indicates that we should not.

### **Trying to find the Other in the modern world**

In his book *Entre Nous (Essays on Thinking-of-the-Other)*, Emmanuel Levinas, working with Edmund Husserl’s and Martin Heidegger’s phenomenological method, tries to prove that philosophy does not rely on ontology [9. P. 6—8]. Instead, he proposes that ethics act as the power that orients philosophy. For him, ethics’ origin lies in face-to-face communication with other people. He suggests that when we interact with another human being, we view him or her not as a possible threat or a reflection of himself or herself; instead, we see him/her as something superior to the self. Levinas insists that it is impossible for a human being to be singled out and remain indifferent to the interactions between himself/herself and other human beings [9. P. 229]. He explains that the I cannot simply withdraw to itself and its solidarity [9. P. 229].

Levinas also addresses the excellence of the multiple, which he claims explicitly does not entail the degradation of the one. According to him, even in theology, a human being has not been created to exist on his/her own. A person needs someone to love and to be loved by and, in a way, a reason to exist [9. P. 20—21, 103]. For Levinas, the human being always seeks another human being to connect with and to be united. He admits that this idea resembles the idea

expressed by Plato in the Symposium in which Love is a demigod because of the separation he has experienced and the constant desire to be reunited with his other half [9. P. 113].

In *Sociality and Justice: Toward Social Phenomenology*, Maria Dimitrova also discusses the responsibility toward the Other as the primary human attitude. It is clarified that by “responsibility toward the Other,” the author does not speak of responsibility individually, from one person to the other. Rather, she is addressing responsibility on a level of totality [10. P. 11]. Dimitrova explains how the relationship between the I and the Other starts with a silent call from the Other [10. P. 12]. Therefore, as Levinas also pointed out, it is in our nature to seek the Other. The interaction is initiated with words but does not stop on the verbal level; it also occurs through deeds, as words motivate actions. However, it is through the conversation that we come to know the Other. Before interacting with him, we have certain expectations regarding his abilities, interests, and motivations; after engaging in a conversation with him, we actively learn things about him, and his expressions usually surprise us because the Other exceeds our expectations [9. P. 32]. Levinas characterizes our encounter with the Other as an encounter with infinity and true experience [9. P. 227].

Responsibility lies in the foundations of our relationship with the Other [9. P. 107]. Dimitrova reminds us of Levinas’ argument that I always have one more responsibility [10. P. 11]. Yet, she also indicates that in modern societies, we constantly feel that someone else has to assume the responsibilities around us [10. P. 104—105]. We know of starving people in third-world countries, children working for a few cents in sweatshops, or rainforests burning down every year. However, we always assume that those are issues that should be dealt with by the government or some institution. In any case, it is never we who have to do something. A lot of this denial to accept responsibility and act on it has to do with our proximity to the problem. If something is happening on the other side of the world, why should I care about it when I am safe and sound in a different part of the world? However, the notion of proximity is not entirely limited to location. It is also related to the “who” is being affected by the problem. Dimitrova suggests that we tend to believe that if someone else is suffering from something and we are not directly affected by it, we assume that this suffering is that person’s business and indeed not our own [10. P. 11—12]. This indifference is characteristic of modern societies and anonymous relations where we expect an anonymous force to fight the battles of others and often our own. However, it is directly opposite to the empathy we have viewed in Levinas’s theory. Levinas claimed that personal responsibility is something that no human being can escape because even if we ignore the Other completely, this is an answer that inevitably connects us to him [9. P. 57—58]. This approach to human relations would explain Levinas’ negation to accept that human relationships could cease to exist. For him, humans cannot stop searching and reaching for each other. While it is impossible for the I to ignore the awareness of itself and escape from the relationship it has itself, it is equally impossible to avoid the Other. The awareness of his existence is ever-present, and

so is the need to reach for him. Thus, the I and the Other are destined to engage in this primordial search of each other.

Dimitrova's reading of Levinas suggests that while the I constantly tries to establish contact with the Other, it can never reach him. Instead, all I can manage is to find the Third one, which, as she says, "is the Other but in the quality of an entity" [10. P. 124]. While the I and the Other have a direct connection and relationship between them, the Third one is not involved in it. In reality, the Third one acts as an observer watching everything from the outside without participating. Dimitrova explains that the position of the Third one can be assumed by anyone regardless of his/her identity, as long as they are not within the face-to-face relation between the I and the Other. Precisely because the Third one is not involved in this interaction, he/she is there, and he/she perceives what is taking place, judging, thinking, describing, and evaluating all the time. Dimitrova also suggests that the appearance of the Third, who is always lurking behind the Other, raises a crucial question regarding our feeling of responsibility [10. P. 141]. Upon its appearance, the I has to compare the Other and the Third one inevitably and with them the Fourth, the Fifth, the Sixth, and every Other that comes after them [10. P. 141]. The I has then to decide upon their priority, the relations between the others and itself with them. The primordial feeling of responsibility that Levinas suggested resides within humans urges us to care and be attentive towards the Other. Still, this inevitable comparison between the Other and the Third one and the decisions that must be made regarding the interpersonal relationships between them and requires the measuring and ranking based on the personal preferences of the I leads to a violation and an abandonment of the moral responsibility.

Levinas's theory of the I and its relationship to the Other, as well as Dimitrova's analysis regarding its implications, are applicable to our effort to understand the changes in human relationships given the mass digitalization in modern societies. While Levinas' book was written a few decades before this discussion could take place, it is easy to imagine his attitude toward the issue. Many people certainly see modern technologies and social networks as valuable tools to maintain relationships with family, friends, and loved ones when physical distance is involved. However, the keyword that should be stressed here is *existing*. The relationships we are talking about here pre-exist the use of technology as a means of communication between the people involved.

Moreover, the very use of modern technology, especially in the mode of video chatting, reveals that the participants who engage in the call desire to be close to one another, and it is due to external factors that they are not. Even the preferred mode of communication in long-distance relationships (Skype calls) reveals that human beings crave face-to-face communication because actual physical proximity is not possible for people to engage in maintaining digital relationships. Even in those cases, though, they prefer to see the person they are talking to instead of opting for another way of communicating, even though, at present, there is a plethora of them available to us.

All of the above do not apply in cases where a relationship is exclusively created in a digital environment without face-to-face communication. As we saw, Levinas stresses the importance of physical proximity in interpersonal relationships. He highlights that face-to-face interaction is essential to create a relationship between the I and the Other [9. P. 32]. A relationship created in a virtual environment lacks that physical contact even if interaction through video takes place at some point because it is not only the mere image of someone that facilitates the connection with him/her. All of the other non-verbal cues that enhance communication, like body language, are difficult to interpret during an interaction that takes place virtually. Moreover, essential aspects of human relationships, such as touch, are missing.

The mere existence of digital relationships is a case that supports Levinas' argument: it is truly impossible to eliminate human interaction because whatever happens, we always seek communication with other people. Whether we are aware of the existing gaps in our social lives or not, we try, in many cases, to cover those holes through modern technologies by creating illusions of human relations. Due to our inability to address the problem directly, many substitutes have been created that provide us with crutches upon which we can lean as we proceed with our lives. Nonetheless, the issue that Levinas proposed is still present. The I is constantly searching for the Other, but it fails to connect with it in the modern world. It does, however, connect with the Third and every other. This jeopardizes the relationship with the Other and, consequently, the sense of fulfillment the I and the Other gain from their relationship as both need the live, face-to-face meeting. Mass digitalization deprives us of our connection with the Other. It redirects us to forced contact with the Third because as we do not interact directly with the Other, we do not interact with the essence of it but an image or representation of him in our mind (the Third). This results in two things: the becomes alienated from the Other and mistakes the contact with the Third for real, honest interaction while it is not. At the same time, the Other is left on his own, forgotten.

As we mistake the Third, the impression of the Other, for the Other himself, we reduce human relationships to something superficial without any depth. Instead of embracing truth and ripping the benefits of our interaction with the Other, we get stuck in a loop of something that is just a mere illusion, and modern media enhance this illusion. By setting real, face-to-face interpersonal relations aside and favoring communication via modern technology, we choose to connect with the idea of the Other and not with the Other himself.

As Levinas claimed, it is truly in the nature of humans to seek the other. Even at a time of mass digitalization, when we know that a massive part of our digital life is nothing more than a façade, we still try to reach for the Other through whichever means we have. At the same time, though, as we know the truth about the digital world, convenient as it is at times, it has not entirely replaced our reality. I believe that Levinas is correct, and human beings always reach for other humans because it is in their nature to do so. Hence, while it could seem that humans are abandoning interpersonal relations in favor of genuine, face-to-face contact, I



believe this is not entirely true. Precisely because the need that Levinas described exists and makes itself apparent to humans through a sense of deprivation of human contact, people become aware that they are missing something and know what it is. Humans' overreliance on digital means of communication, especially social network platforms, is actually the result of that need. However, the more they rely on them for their interactions, the more ground they gain over physical encounters because the circumstances of digital communication are radically different. So, a seemingly endless circle begins where our inability to interact successfully with other people is explained by our constant use of digital means of communication, and we turn to them even more because we feel uncomfortable with face-to-face interactions because we have grown more comfortable with them. Still, ominous as this may sound, I believe that interpersonal human relations will never be entirely replaced by digital substitutes even when faced with such a seemingly unbeatable opponent.

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