

## **Being-with Smartphones**

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**Abstract:** In a social situation, why is it sometimes off-putting when a person reaches for his smartphone? In small-group contexts such as a college seminar, a business meeting, a family meal, or a small musical performance, when a person begins texting or interacting with social media on a smartphone he may disengage from the group. When we do find this off-putting, we typically consider it to be just impolite or inappropriate. In this essay, I argue that something more profound is at stake. One significant way in which individuals shape their self-identities is through interactions with others in small groups. Much identity-work is interdependent; it requires generating and preserving social contexts. I argue that the smartphone-use of some individuals can fracture a group's context and thus negatively affect the identity-work of others. In this essay, I examine identity-work, sociality, and personal technology from a perspective of existential phenomenology.

**Key words:** self, identity, phenomenology, existentialism, personal technology

## 1. Introduction

Personal technology has inserted itself into many areas of our lives before we have had the chance to examine the role it plays and evaluate its effects. Both individually and culturally, it is important to seek a better understanding of this impact. To consider a timely example, the ubiquity of smartphones has substantially altered our social environments. In this essay, I will consider the impact of smartphone-use in small-group settings.

Smartphones impact small groups in many ways. I will examine the effect of smartphone-use upon the typically unnoticed work one does to create one's self-identity. I will argue that certain smartphone-use tears the social fabric in ways that are detrimental to identity-work, and that this is a compelling reason to be cautious about smartphone-use in small groups. I will work with the small-group example of a college philosophy seminar, but my general contention can be extended to similar group-contexts, such as business meetings, small musical performances, small charity events, dinner parties, family gatherings, and so on.

I will draw upon the foundational existentialist claim that an individual creates her self-identity. In order to explore this with specificity, I will focus on early Heidegger. To bring out the sense in which this identity-work is social, I will invoke Heidegger's notion of "being-with" (*Mitsein*).<sup>1</sup> We will see that identity-work takes place in social contexts that a group of individuals create and preserve together. The focus here will not be on the identity-work of those who are using smartphones; the focus will be the negative impact of some individuals' smartphone-use upon the social context and the identity-work of others.

Before we begin, consider a straightforward way to frame an examination of the impact of smartphones in small groups—but one which I will not adopt here. Each of the small groups

mentioned above seem to have a practical objective. In college seminars, for example, the primary objective is learning. The social-science research on personal technology in classrooms is often focused on the impact of smartphones and other technologies upon student-learning.<sup>2</sup> Other examples of small groups have practical objectives as well. Regarding a business meeting, one might consider the effect of smartphone-use on the efficiency of achieving meeting goals, such as arriving at a consensus about the contents of a marketing proposal. Regarding a small musical performance, the objective might be conceived as fostering an aesthetic experience in audience members. One could evaluate the effect of smartphone-use by audience members on achieving that objective. I will not focus on this kind of practical objective.

To my knowledge, there has not been empirical research conducted on the topic of this essay. More broadly, however, there is empirical research suggesting that certain smartphone-use can have negative social effects. For example, some researchers are finding that the presence of smartphones has a negative effect on the general quality of face-to-face conversation.<sup>3</sup> Others are finding that smartphone-use has a negative effect on the development of empathy.<sup>4</sup> Other than in section 5, I will not focus on empirical research in this essay. But my claims will resonate with some empirical research, which I will mention in endnotes.

## **2. Seminar**

I want to begin by imagining an example that will familiarize us with the relevant phenomena. I will return to the example throughout the essay for illustrative purposes and also in the hope that considering these issues through a concrete example will serve as some persuasion to supplement my other reasoning.

Imagine a philosophy seminar consisting of seventeen students sitting at a large table. Although the professor raises questions, clarifies arguments, makes interpretive claims, and occasionally reads key passages from texts, the seminar primarily operates through active discussion. Suppose that a topic has emerged that has grabbed most everyone's interest. A discussion unfolds in which students and the professor are taking turns offering points of clarification, articulating pieces of reasoning, and so on. A significant number of the students are engaged in this process, making the mood in the room lively. The professor is holding back some concluding points in order to allow the discussion to develop organically. Progress is being made. There is a sense that the group is working through a set of issues together. The students are even taking the discussion in effective directions that the professor did not anticipate, which adds a layer of gratification to the discussion, both for the professor and the students.

Now imagine that one student, Emma, is attempting to articulate a complex point. Let's say that she is challenging a statement in the text by drawing upon a point made in another reading. While she works through her thoughts aloud, another student, call him Joe, reaches for his smartphone, and begins texting, in effect disengaging from what Emma is saying, and from the seminar in general.<sup>5</sup> Like a yawn, the contagion results in two other students beginning to look at their phones.<sup>6</sup> Emma notices, and the behavior strikes her as impolite. This kind of situation has become increasingly common in small groups. How can we understand what's at stake here?

### **3. Identity**

It is helpful to begin by asking—What is Emma trying to do in the seminar? What is the import of the seminar for Emma? While Emma is certainly in the seminar to learn, the seminar has a

more basic, underlying value for her, which is somewhat hidden. Emma is shaping an important aspect of who she is trying to become through the seminar. She is cultivating an intellectual layer of her self-identity. Emma has chosen to study philosophy, so she is developing her self as a person who employs the methodology and draws upon the history of philosophy to think about the world and her place in it. She takes studying philosophy seriously. To give it a name, let's say that Emma is a budding philosopher.<sup>7</sup> We can call this work she is engaged in identity-work.

A common existentialist claim is that humans do not have a general essence; we do not have a human nature. Rather, I create or shape my individual essence, my self-identity.<sup>8</sup> Using the term "*Dasein*" to refer to the self (roughly), Martin Heidegger is getting at something like this when he writes, "*The essence of Dasein lies in its existence*" (1962, 67). Hubert Dreyfus emphasizes that this meaning of *existence*, this shaping of one's self-identity, is active and social: "To exist is to take a stand on what is essential about one's being and to be defined by that stand. Thus Dasein is what, in its social activity, it interprets itself to be" (Dreyfus 1991, 23).<sup>9</sup> For example, an individual creates her self-identity as a drummer by watching and listening to other drummers, by discussing music with other musicians, by playing music with other musicians, by playing for audiences while being affected by their reactions to the music, and so on.

Note that an individual's self-identity is not singular. An individual is not *only* a drummer or a budding philosopher or a sacrificial parent; an individual's identity consists of a cluster of what we might call *roles*. For example, one person might be primarily a budding philosopher *and* a conscientious friend *and* a committed romantic partner *and* an anti-gun activist. What I am cashing out as a role is what Heidegger refers to as a "for-the-sake-of-which."<sup>10</sup> The sense of this term is that, after her friend underwent a traumatic event, Emma calls her friend *for-the-sake-of* being a conscientious friend. A for-the-sake-of-which is roughly a self-interpretation:

Dreyfus writes, “A for-the-sake-of-which, like *being* a father or *being* a professor, is not to be thought of as a goal I have in mind and can achieve. Indeed, it is not a goal at all, but rather a self-interpretation that informs and orders all my activities” (Dreyfus 1991, 95).

Although identity-work is often deliberate, it can be less deliberate, less conscious, than one might expect. Dreyfus has raised interesting examples of identity-work that seem quite undeliberate, such as being a sacrificial parent. Even though no one sets out to become a sacrificial parent (I presume), this self-identity is nevertheless created through various actions. Dreyfus writes:

[F]or-the-sake-of-whichs need not be intentional at all. I pick up my most basic life-organizing self-interpretations by socialization, not by choosing them. For example, one behaves as an older brother or a mama's girl without having chosen these organizing self-interpretations, and without having them in mind as specific purposes. These ways of being lead one to certain organized activities such as being a teacher, nurse, victim, etc. Each such “role” is an integrated set of practices: one might say “a practice,” as in the practice of medicine. (Dreyfus 1991, 96)<sup>11</sup>

Now, in Emma’s case, by whichever path, she has found herself engaging seriously in philosophy seminars, and she has a sense that this is important to her. She may consciously consider herself to be a budding philosopher or she may not. Either way, this role makes sense of the way she behaves. For example, Emma takes the textual support of the claims discussed in the seminar more seriously than some other students, even other good students. Interestingly, her role may be identified by someone else before she realizes it herself. Another student might say to her—under his breath and in a slightly irritated tone—“*Okay, Professor.*” In

such a moment, Emma may realize for the first time perhaps—“Oh, I *do* care about this more than some other students; maybe this is who I am interested in becoming.”<sup>12</sup> While she is doing her identity-work, engaging in discussion about claims and arguments, and so on, she will typically not be thinking about her budding role; she will be in a groove, absorbedly coping, as Dreyfus would say.<sup>13</sup>

You might think of this essay as attempting to answer three questions; I have already suggested an answer to the first. (a) What is the import of the seminar for Emma? My answer is that one valuable aspect of the seminar for Emma is that it is where and when she does certain identity-work. (Note that we could just as easily be considering the identity-work accomplished in other small groups.) The strategy of the remainder of the essay is to answer two additional questions. (b) In what ways does Emma’s identity-work depend upon others? (c) What effect does the smartphone-use of others in the seminar have upon Emma’s identity-work?

#### **4. Being-with**

In this section, I want to answer the second question: In what ways does Emma’s identity-work depend upon others? I’ve said that, according to existential phenomenology, Emma shapes her self-identity by taking certain actions in a social context. We can get a better sense of this social emphasis by considering the phenomenon of *being-with* (*Mitsein*), drawing from Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1962).

To begin, consider Heidegger’s notion of *world*. The world is not a thing, not a place, but rather a context with which I am involved. To get a sense of what Heidegger means by *world* consider the academic world of our example. We can think of the academic world as a microcosm of Heidegger’s broader notion of world.<sup>14</sup> The academic world is made up of

individuals occupying various roles (or we might say, enacting various self-interpretations), such as attentive students, budding philosophers, class clowns, teachers, program assistants, and deans. These roles are related in various ways, and they are grounded on practices. Further, students and teachers use items such as pens, books, notebooks, seminar-room tables, chairs, chalkboards, and attendance sheets. This equipment, and the ways in which these items are related, are part of what constitutes the academic world.

Heidegger believes that we can render intelligible and grasp the significance of equipment, human roles, and practices, by clarifying relations, by articulating the structure of the world (which he calls *worldhood*). Dreyfus walks us through an example: “I write on the blackboard *in* a classroom, *with* a piece of chalk, *in order to* draw a chart, as a step *towards* explaining Heidegger, *for the sake of* my being a good teacher” (1991, 92, emphasis in original). He continues: “The intelligibility of a piece of chalk is that it is used in order to write on blackboards; the point of writing on the board with a piece of chalk is tied in to practices necessary for a self-interpretation, such as being a teacher” (Dreyfus 1991, 348 n.5).

I want to extract a straightforward point from the above: In cultivating the role of a budding philosopher, Emma relies upon this context of equipment as well as the social aspect of the context. These roles, and this equipment, have the meaning and significance they do because of this social context, this academic world.

Heidegger famously claims that you and I (*Dasein*) are being-in-the-world. He does not intend the “in” spatially, like being in a room. Rather, the “in” refers to the fact that I am necessarily *involved* in the world. Similarly, when Heidegger claims that Dasein is being-with (*Mitsein*), the “with” does not mean that other individuals are here with me, in the sense of being

physically present.<sup>15</sup> Rather, “being-with” refers to our underlying involvement with others.<sup>16</sup> As William Blattner provisionally defines it, “‘being-with’ is Heidegger’s term for the background way in which we share the world with others.” (1999, 50 n.31). (Relatedly, Heidegger refers to the being of *others* as *Dasein-with* [*Mitdasein*], which is intended to highlight the fact that this underlying involvement is not a being-with things or equipment but with other *Dasein*.<sup>17</sup>)

Again, I am being-with, which is ontological, even in a particular situation in which I am physically alone—this latter, particular level of description is what Heidegger calls *ontic*.<sup>18</sup> Heidegger writes, “Even *Dasein*’s Being-alone is Being-with in the world. The Other can *be missing* only *in* and *for* a Being-with. Being-alone is a deficient mode of Being-with” (1962, 156–57, emphasis in original). Heidegger fleshes out the nature of being-with through the observation that our underlying ontological orientation or relation toward others is one of solicitude (*Fürsorge*). The ontological/ontic distinction is important regarding solicitude because Heidegger does not mean that we always care for particular others (again, this particularity is ontic). In fact, Heidegger believes that we are not typically solicitous of others; instead, we tend to be indifferent to others, disrespectful, inconsiderate, and so on:

*Dasein* maintains itself proximally and for the most part in the deficient modes of solicitude. Being for, against, or without one another, passing one another by, not “mattering” to one another—these are possible ways of solicitude. And it is precisely these last-named deficient and indifferent modes that characterize everyday, average Being-with-one-another.

(Heidegger 1962, 158)

Now, the Heideggerian world is a social context that we utilize and rely upon together. Consider the shared nature of the assigned text on this day in the seminar. Emma is focused on

the text in asking a question (she might read aloud a short passage of the text to support an interpretive point she has made); the teacher is also focused on the text in answering the question (the teacher may read another passage). The students and teacher also share the equipment of the university, the classroom, and they lean on the same seminar-room table. In addition, each student is shaping her own role in the same public context that is made up of the same equipment, the same general roles, and the same practices.

It is not only the case that we use and rely upon the same social context; Emma's identity-work and the identity-work of others is intertwined; their identity-work is, in fact, interdependent. The work she is engaged in to shape her identity is interwoven with the identity-work of others. For example, my identity work in sustaining or developing my identity as a philosophy teacher is interwoven with Emma's identity-work in establishing her identity as a budding philosopher. And the identity-work of one budding philosopher, Emma, is intertwined with the identity-work of another budding philosopher, Khiry, and another merely strategic learner, Frank. Consider Blattner's and then Dreyfus's comments about the necessarily social dimension of identity-work:

In confronting the question of *my* identity, I am also confronting the question of the identity of *others*. . . . I cannot disentangle who I am from who those around me are. . . . As I go about being a father, teacher, and neighbor, how those with whom I engage in being all these things understand themselves is not irrelevant to me. That my sons respond to my fathering by being adoring children, that some of my students respond to my teaching by dedicating themselves to their studies, is crucially important to me in so far as I am a father and teacher. (Blattner 2006, 39, emphasis in original)<sup>19</sup>

Dasein is always interpreting its being in term[s] of its for-the-sake-of-whichs, and since one's role, say that of being a professor, makes no sense without other roles, like that of being a student, as well as meshing with still other roles such as being a teaching assistant, librarian, advisor, registrar, etc., we cannot even make sense of a nonsocial Dasein.

(Dreyfus 1991, 148)

Recall our second question—In what ways does Emma's identity work depend upon others? We find an answer in the interdependency of identity-work. In the seminar, Emma cannot effectively shape her role as a budding philosopher—she cannot effectively conduct her identity-work—without some others in the seminar conducting their own identity-work. Perhaps it does not matter which others are conducting their own identity-work, because, setting aside what might be interesting and helpful to her, what is necessary is that the group-context be preserved. Among other contexts, Emma relies upon a functioning seminar context for her identity-work.<sup>20</sup>

What is crucial for the kinds of identity-work I am considering is not merely the ontological structure of being-with but the particular ways in which individuals relate, their modes of solicitude. The seminar context cannot be sustained through entirely deficient modes of solicitude. Emma relies upon a seminar context in which she is understood, engaged with, intellectually challenged by the other students and the teacher, and so on.

Consider some of the contextual requirements of this small group. If there are not a sufficient number of students in the seminar who have completed the required reading in advance of the session, then a serious discussion cannot take root. Further, some students must be following the finer points of the teacher's explication of the arguments in order for the

students to be able to understand and engage with Emma's complex comments. It is not the case that Emma's identity-work requires every other student in the seminar to be cultivating the identity of a budding philosopher. But if most of the other students are working toward identities like "class clown" or "cool and detached," then the kind of intellectual interaction Emma relies upon to pursue her identity-work in the seminar will not be available, and at some level of general detachment this will simply cease to be a functioning seminar context. And we should not let the teacher off the hook. Such students' identity-work also depends upon the teacher doing her own complimentary identity-work. If the teacher does not take the students seriously enough—if she does not sufficiently challenge them—then it will not be possible for Emma to conduct effective identity-work through the seminar. Ultimately, to effectively accomplish her identity-work in the seminar, Emma relies upon the functioning of the context, which is concretely constituted by, and sustained by, these others occupying the requisite roles.

Above, I answered our second question in a second-person manner, by focusing upon the interdependency of Emma's and others' roles in the seminar. For our purposes of considering the effects of smartphones in small groups, it is, indeed, helpful to highlight the relationships between smartphone users and others engaged in identity-work. But ultimately, what Emma relies upon are not particular others but having access to a functioning social context (which is created and maintained by some others). The most straightforward way, therefore, to answer our second question is to focus on the negative effects of smartphone-use upon the social context. Take our second question again—In what ways does Emma's identity work depend upon others? In order to conduct her identity-work in the seminar, the seminar context must be effectively functioning; others create and sustain this context along with Emma.

Whether we consider a philosophy seminar, a small musical performance, or a business meeting, there will be a threshold of engagement—in the activity that makes the group the group that it is—that must be met by members of the group in order to create and preserve the group’s social context. And in order for a member of a group to engage in identity-work, the group’s social context must be preserved. There are many ways in which members of a small group might disengage from the group’s social context. Next, we will consider one, increasingly ubiquitous way in which individuals disengage from groups, smartphone-use.

## **5. Smartphones**

Recall our third question: What effect does the smartphone-use of others in the seminar have upon Emma’s identity-work? Consider this answer: If smartphone-use results in disengagement from the group’s defining activity (the activity that makes the group the group that it is), and if this disengagement leads to a failure to preserve the group’s context, then the interaction Emma relies upon to pursue her identity-work in the seminar will not be available. One way students in a seminar can be disengaged is by texting, engaging with social media, and so on. To generalize, smartphone-use by some individuals in small groups can be detrimental to the identity-work of others.

Is this correct? Consider one main line of criticism of my position, and to make this criticism concrete, consider it from the perspective of one student in the seminar, Joe. Joe might claim that he is able to use his smartphone, and at the same time, remain sufficiently engaged in the seminar. He believes he can read and write texts on his smartphone while keeping enough of his attention on the seminar in order to play his part in preserving the seminar context.

To begin to frame my reply to Joe, consider the structure of experience. To adopt the core of the position Maurice Merleau-Ponty sets out in his *Phenomenology of Perception* (2012), our experience has a structure at least in the sense that some things are in the foreground and others are in the background. When Joe is sitting across from Emma, focusing on her articulation of her argument, Emma, and her claims and reasoning, are in the foreground of his experience. In the background are the trees through the window, other students, the sounds in the hall, and so on. When Joe begins texting, Emma and her ideas recede into the background; the person with whom Joe is texting, and that person's ideas and questions, surge into the foreground. Joe becomes more engaged with his texting-friend than he is with Emma, even if his friend is six-thousand miles away.<sup>21</sup> If this is right, then Joe disengages from his immediate context while texting, insofar as his immediate context recedes into the background. If Joe experiences Emma's articulation of her argument as a background experience only, he will likely not be able to engage with it.

Joe might reply to these claims by declaring that he can control his attention, shifting back and forth rapidly at will. This shifting enables him, he says, to give sufficient attention to both his texting and the seminar discussion.

### *Sedimentation and Dominant Stability*

Here is one objection to Joe's claim. Robert Rosenberger applies Merleau-Ponty's more general concept of sedimentation to our experience with technology, claiming that the experiential structures associated with certain pieces of technology are deeply engrained through habitual use:

Sedimentation refers to the strength of the habits associated with the experiential structures of a given human-technology relation. It is the magnitude of the habitual force associated with a user's relationship with a particular technology. When a particular human-technology relation has a high degree of sedimentation, that user is strongly inclined to experience the use of that technology in a specific, long-established manner. (Rosenberger 2014, 27)

The idea is that when Joe begins to text, the experiential structure that is commonly associated with his texting-activity automatically and immediately clicks into gear (which is likely a structure in which the text-conversation is in the foreground). To unpack the sedimentation metaphor: "like rock formations built up over time through the accumulation of small deposits" of sediment, the persisting structure of Joe's texting-experience is constructed from all of the many times he texts — at home, on the bus, walking, and so on (Rosenberger and Verbeek 2015, 25). Since the structure is constructed of so many "deposits," this texting-experiential-structure is stubborn; it is not easily altered. If our relationship to devices like smartphones truly is this stubborn, then it seems unlikely that Joe will have the requisite control of his experiential structures to enable him to make rapid shifts in attention; it is unlikely that he could text and remain involved in the seminar discussion. It is likely, then, that Joe's typical texting-experiential-structure disengages him from the context of the seminar discussion.

We can put a finer point on this relational stubbornness by employing the concept of *dominant stability*, which invites us to think about the combination of a smartphone's (or an app's) design, habits of use, as well as sedimentation.<sup>23</sup> Rosenberger describes dominant stability through the example of a cellular phone, in the context of his analysis of driving-while-talking:

It is important to recognize that our typical relationship to the telephone . . . should be understood as the telephone's "dominant stability." That is, the dominant way users experience the phone is as a device which itself takes on a degree of transparency as it is used, and which composes a user's overall awareness into a field [a structure] primarily and centrally occupied by the content of the conversation and the presence of the interlocutor.<sup>24</sup> By "dominant stability," two things are indicated: (1) that this is the typical usage of the phone, the one for which the device was designed, and the one which the user typically intends to take up; and (2) that the habits associated with this stability are deeply sedimented through a user's individual history of usage. (Rosenberger 2014, 39–40)

Perhaps smartphones are even more likely than some other pieces of technology to possess a particularly strong dominant stability, because smartphone design, and the way we tend to use them, results in their occupying a quite personal, even intimate, space in our lives. Smartphones seem more personal than traditional telephones. The thought is that the dominant stability of a smartphone, being established through use as an especially personal device, is quite likely to pull one away from a physically social context, and to pull the user into the world of his phone in a way that is sedimented and difficult to alter. For our purposes, the point is that a smartphone's dominant stability is likely to leave Joe sufficiently disengaged and not supporting the seminar context, which will lead to failing to support Emma's identity-work. (I will add support below to the claim that smartphones are personal devices.)

There is yet another way to reply to Joe here. Regarding the defining activity of some groups, continuous, focused attention will be necessary to remain effectively engaged. So, even if Joe could rapidly shift his attention back-and-forth between the seminar and texting, this shifting itself will result in his failing to give sufficient continuous attention to the defining activity.

Insofar as philosophical reasoning requires holding multiple points in one's mind for extended periods of time, more continuous attention to Emma is crucial. Generally speaking, failing to grasp these finer points in a philosophical discussion is likely to result in failing to contribute to preserving the requisite seminar context.<sup>25</sup>

### *Multi-attention*

Let's return to Joe's core contention, because we may be missing an underlying, reasonable point: Is it not possible to attend to two things simultaneously? Rather than interpreting Joe's contention as having to do with rapid shifts of attention, perhaps we should understand him as claiming that he can employ some kind of multi-attention. There do seem to be situations in which we can effectively attend to two things at once, even if one of the things is a technological device. Galit Wellner offers the following observations.

Compare the experience of silently driving a car to driving with the radio turned on, or with a friend attending the journey, or while talking on a cell phone. Even if there is less attention to the operational aspects, the whole experience is more vibrant. It can even be considered safer if compared to falling asleep while driving. (Wellner 2014, 58)

Although it seems initially viable, ultimately this invocation of multi-attention will not save Joe's argument. We can see why by considering Diane Michelfelder's distinction between weak multi-attention and strong multi-attention (which Michelfelder offers as an elaboration of Wellner's account). Roughly speaking, weak multi-attention is cognitively less demanding; strong multi-attention is cognitively more demanding. Driving while speaking on a phone is a case of weak multi-attention (at least if one is driving, let's say, on a country road, where the driving is not too cognitively demanding). More specifically, multi-attention is weak when two

activities are complementary, when one can combine two activities into a single object of focus, such as driving and talking or folding laundry while watching television. Weak multi-attention seems common and viable.

Multi-attention is strong when the two activities are not complementary, and when one cannot combine two activities into a single object of focus: “Strong multi-attention could be defined as the simultaneous attention given to more than one object where the attention given to one object does not improve the experience of the other” (Michelfelder 2014, 124).

Michelfelder offers these vivid examples:

Using one hand to steer a vacuum cleaner across the floor while using the other to brush one’s teeth, or playing bike polo while looking at an iPhone attached to the handlebars of one’s bike to keep track of how the stock market is doing, would be examples of strong multi-attention. (Michelfelder, *ibid.*)

My point is that Joe’s situation in the seminar is one in which he would have to employ strong multi-attention. Claiming that he can maintain a text conversation while also engaging in a philosophical discussion in a seminar is more like using one hand to steer a vacuum cleaner across the floor while using the other to brush his teeth than it is like talking on the phone while driving on a country road. Texting and engaging in a seminar are contradictory activities not complementary activities. Imagine Joe listening carefully to Emma’s probing questions just after the teacher introduces Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s claims about motor intentionality for the first time—while he is also texting with a friend about an emerging problem in his friend’s romantic relationship (the latter would involve reading texts, formulating and writing questions of clarification, articulating opinions, and so on).

I began this section by answering our third question in this way: If smartphone-use leads to a degree of disengagement from the group's defining activity such that the group-context cannot be preserved, then the interactions Emma relies upon for pursuing her identity-work in the seminar will not be available. Just above, I have focused on considering one individual, Joe, using a smartphone. And I have given reasons to believe that when he texts he would disengage from the seminar context to the extent that he would fail to support that context and thereby fail to support Emma's identity-work.

### *The Group Context*

As I have said above, ultimately, our focus in this essay can shift away from one individual toward the group context. A philosophy seminar is a certain kind of context in which we do certain kinds of work. As long as the context is functioning and available for Emma to engage with, individual contributions to the context can vary. We can obviously have a functioning philosophy-seminar context in which many students are not budding philosophers—some students can be merely strategic learners or students who are struggling with the material. But pervasive disengagement can result in the context breaking down. And we are here considering the way in which this disengagement can be brought on by certain smartphone-use (the aforementioned contagion of smartphone-use is relevant here). Exactly what is required for the seminar context to be preserved? This cannot be determined abstractly; the answer will depend upon the particular group, the material being discussed, and so on. In addition, different individuals will have different needs for effectively accomplishing identity-work. The context Emma needs will depend upon how many philosophy courses she has taken, how sensitive she is to being ignored, her mood on a given day, and so on. What we can say abstractly is that the kind of identity-work we are considering depends upon a social context, it depends upon others,

and when more than a small percentage of the group disengages from this kind of context, it is likely to have a negative effect on identity-work.

With this focus on group contexts, we can ask whether individual smartphone-users have a responsibility of some sort to particular other individuals in a group when the latter are attempting to do identity-work. Maybe they do, but it seems more straightforward to claim that individuals have a responsibility to the group. Upon joining a group, perhaps each person should be understood to be accepting some responsibility to play her part in preserving the group context. This context is important for individuals at least insofar as it is by means of this context that a person can engage in identity-work. When a person makes the decision to join such a group he is making a commitment to others in the group to do his part to sustain the social context.<sup>26</sup>

Recall the examples of other kinds of small groups: a business meeting, a small musical performance, a small charity event, a dinner party, or a family gathering in the home. In each of these cases, will smartphone users likely disengage from the group's social context, and so potentially have a negative effect on the identity-work of others? One way to determine the precise sense in which these groups are analogous to the seminar is to consider whether (a) texting (say) and (b) engaging with the group will require managing contradictory activities; that is, whether this requires strong multi-attention.

### *Miscellaneous Distractions and the Personal Nature of Smartphones*

Why am I focusing on smartphones in this essay? What about other potentially disruptive activities that are not uncommon in a seminar (or in other small groups), such as doodling, daydreaming, whisper-conversations, and so on? I am focusing on smartphones because, in

recent years, we are experiencing a dramatic increase in smartphone-use in small-group settings (we are not experiencing a dramatic increase in doodling). As I said at the outset, as personal technology increasingly inserts itself into our lives, we must seek to understand its impact. Examining the effects of smartphone-use is culturally and individually pressing.

There is another way to make the case that smartphones warrant special consideration. Take the seminar example. To put this in the terms of the previous section, one might argue that texting (for example) on a smartphone is less complementary to the defining activity of a seminar than doodling, intermittent whispering, and so on. One could argue that doodling while engaging in a seminar requires only weak multi-attention, whereas attempting to text on a smartphone while engaging in a seminar would require strong multi-attention. If this is granted, then doodling (and perhaps occasional daydreaming and whisper-conversations as well) will not prevent individuals from remaining engaged in a seminar, and so will not be detrimental to the identity-work of others.

What about the use of other potentially disruptive technological devices, such as laptops? Why not consider laptops as well as smartphones in this essay? While there will be some similarities, smartphones are phenomenologically different from laptops; we experience and engage with smartphones differently than laptops. I will devote the remainder of this section to supporting a claim I raised in the previous section: smartphones are personal devices—more so than laptops. This is a way to highlight a distinction between smartphones and laptops, in order to further justify focusing only on smartphones in this essay.

In section 5, drawing upon Rosenberger and others, I claimed that smartphones possess a particularly strong dominant stability, because smartphone design, and the way we tend to use

smartphones, results in their occupying a quite personal, even intimate space in our lives. Therefore, the dominant stability of a smartphone is quite likely to pull one out of a social context, and to pull the user into the virtual world of his phone, in a way that is sedimented and difficult to resist or adjust. As I have claimed, returning to Joe, a smartphone's dominant stability is likely to leave him sufficiently disengaged, not supporting the seminar context, which will lead to his failing to support Emma's identity-work.

There is certain social-science research that lends support to the contention that smartphones are personal items. Technologists were beginning to notice the unusually personal nature of cell phones early in the century. In 2005, Lara Srivastava writes, "Indeed, users are getting closer and closer to their mobile phone and at all times of the day. A large number of people use their mobile phones as their alarm clock and sleep with their phone under their pillow or on their bedside table" (2005, 112–13).<sup>27</sup> And further:

The mobile phone has indeed become the most intimate aspect of a user's personal sphere of objects (e.g. keys, wallet, money etc.). It gives users the impression that they are constantly connected to the world outside, and therefore less alone. Both physical and emotional attachment to mobile handsets is increasing. (Srivastava 2005, 113)

One way that researchers have revealed the degree to which even earlier mobile phones were quite personal objects is through the observation that a range of users undergo anxiety upon being separated from their phones. More recently, in 2014, the media psychologist Nancy Cheever and her colleagues have written: "With the majority of American adults using smartphones on a daily basis . . . people's dependence on these devices has created a culture of connectedness in which users access their WMDs [wireless mobile devices] everywhere and

at any time” (2014, 290). Cheever and her colleagues investigated the effects of separating individuals from their smartphones. The associated article’s long title conveys their focus: “Out of sight is not out of mind: The impact of restricting wireless mobile device use on anxiety levels among low, moderate and high users.” Cheever and her colleagues contend that the effect of separating moderate and heavy users from their smartphones should be conceived as a form of separation anxiety:

While anxiety is a symptom of substance withdrawal, researchers have been unable to clearly classify WMD overuse or dependency as an addiction. A more appropriate classification might be separation anxiety . . . whereby moderate to heavy WMD users experience a feeling of loss when their device is absent. Separation anxiety is a salient feature of most close relationships. Because many people rely on their WMD for communication, entertainment, information, and to stay connected to loved ones and acquaintances, the WMD may have become a surrogate friend or family member that satisfies people’s needs and desires. When the device is taken away or even placed out of sight, people who rely on this technology more will undoubtedly feel separation anxiety or “lost” without it. (Cheever et al. 2014, 295)

In research presented in her 2011 dissertation, the sociologist Jane Vincent found that individuals considered their mobile phones to be personal possessions; they felt differently about landlines, laptops, and so on. (Note that the distinction between smartphones and laptops is drawn explicitly here.) One reason mobile phones are experienced as personal devices is that we carry them with us almost always. And even when our mobile phone ringers are silenced information from friends and loved ones comes into one's phone. This information can be accessed quickly and easily. And of course, vibrating notifications of incoming calls and other

information makes us feel connected even when our phone is silenced. Vincent goes a step further, highlighting that it is comforting simply knowing that your phone is with you, that it is collecting information and maintaining your contact with the outside world.<sup>28</sup>

In addition, similar to Cheever and her colleagues' conclusion a few years later, Vincent notes the negative emotions associated with not having one's phone: "For these respondents there is a sense of vulnerability about not having their mobile phone. . . . they just have to have the phone with them or else they feel uncomfortable and strange, even isolated" (2011, 136). Some respondents said that they felt "lost," "naked," or "could not cope" without their phones (Vincent 2011, 138–40). Vincent finds that, for some of her respondents, having access to the internet, and so on, through a computer, does not fill the void of a missing mobile phone.<sup>29</sup>

The mobile phone for these respondents was more than merely a tool for communications—it had come to represent much more. It elicited positive and negative emotion responses . . . causing them distress and anxiety if they forgot or lost it. (Vincent 2011, 141)

As we have transitioned from more limited mobile phones to smartphones, the features and functionality that connect people to their mobile phones has multiplied. Given this, it stands to reason that more of us have become personally attached to our smartphones.

I am contending that the personal nature of smartphones distinguishes them from laptops sufficiently to warrant treating smartphones separately in this essay. Smartphones have a firm dominant stability, which has grown out of personal attachment to one's phone, and continual use. The suggestion is that if you text in bed, on the bus, on your couch, and so on, then when you text in a seminar you are experientially pulled out of the seminar context and transported

into a texting set, a mood, or orientation. Thus, you are less likely to remain engaged in the seminar. We have seen that this can have a negative effect on the identity-work of others.

## **6. Conclusion**

I have offered a framework for understanding and assessing the impact of smartphone-use in small-group settings. I have set in relief a somewhat hidden interest of individuals in certain small-group settings, namely, identity-work. According to existential phenomenologists such as Heidegger, an individual creates her self-identity in a social context. For example, it is common for a student to work toward creating an aspect of her self-identity as a budding philosopher in philosophy seminars. This identity-work requires interactions with others; it is interdependent with the identity-work of others. I have argued that certain kinds of smartphone-use, such as texting and engaging with social media, are likely to cause one to disengage from the defining activity of a small-group context, such as a philosophy seminar, which can result in the degradation of the seminar context when enough individuals are using smartphones. Smartphone-use by some individuals in small groups can be detrimental to the identity-work of others.

Why believe this? It is likely that our smartphone habits are quite engrained through habitual use. This is especially so given that our smartphones are personal items, which sets smartphones apart from laptops. This suggests that the experiential structures we establish through our ordinary smartphone-use are inflexible and not easily adaptable to attention-heavy tasks in social contexts, especially when these tasks require continuous attention. Further, it is unlikely that a smartphone-user could simply add to his plate, so to speak, a demanding cognitive task such as engaging with a seminar. This would require strong multi-attention, which seems untenable.

We should be more sensitive to and supportive of one another's identity-work, and the social contexts that foster it. In the long term, taking this seriously involves the hard work of adjusting ingrained smartphone habits that currently tend to pull us away from actual, social contexts. This work can be aided by changes in smartphone design and app design. These changes in behavior and design can be informed by uncovering the ways in which smartphone-use can conflict with core interests relevant to our well-being, such as identity-work. In the short term, we can set our smartphones aside in the interest of being-with others.

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## Notes

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1. Heidegger's "Black Notebooks" have revealed the depth of his anti-Semitism (see Mitchell and Trawny 2017). Those who are writing about or teaching Heidegger's philosophy must be alert to aspects of his philosophy that may serve as building blocks of anti-Semitism, and we must call-out these aspects.

2. The negative impact of smartphones on learning may even extend to the learning of students sitting near smartphone users. See Sherry Turkle (2015, ch. 4.1). Some of the relevant research focuses on laptops in the classroom, and multitasking. For example, Faria Sana, Tina Weston, and Nicholas J. Cepeda, "Laptop Multitasking Hinders Classroom Learning for Both Users and Nearby Peers" (2013). For the relevance of laptops to this essay, see section 5.

3. For a consideration of these issues in the social science literature, see the following: Shalini Misra et al. (2014); Andrew K. Przybylski and Netta Weinstein, "Can you connect with me now? How the presence of mobile communication technology influences face-to-face conversation quality" (2012); Hans Geser (2006). Srivastava writes, "[T]he quality of face-to-face communications may be threatened by the always-on nature of mobile phones. Interaction with those that are present can be interrupted at any moment by interaction with a remote other—leading to a scenario of being 'always-on, always there' but 'never here'" (Srivastava 2005, 125).

4. See Turkle (2015), chapter 1.1: "The Case for Conversation: The Empathy Diaries."

5. This example presupposes that smartphone-use is not prohibited altogether by the teacher or that the teacher does not intervene to curb the smartphone-use.

6. For some empirical evidence that smartphone-use is contagious, see Julia A. Finkel and Daniel J. Kruger (2012).

7. Of course, there are other activities that contribute to shaping this part of Emma's identity. For example, she discusses philosophical ideas with other students outside of the classroom, she reads and writes about philosophy, she will likely visit office hours to have conversations with professors, she attends extra-curricular philosophy events, and so on.

8. Consider these passages about self-creation by Friedrich Nietzsche and then Jean-Paul Sartre: "We, however, want to become who we are—human beings who are new, unique, incomparable, who give themselves laws, who create themselves!" (Nietzsche 2001, §335). Sartre: "The doctrine I am presenting is the very opposite of quietism, since it declares, 'There is no reality except in action'. Moreover, it goes further, since it adds, 'Man is nothing else than his plan; he exists only to the extent that he fulfills himself; he is therefore nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life'." (Sartre 2001, 300). In discussing Heidegger, William Blattner writes the following about his (Blattner's) use of the term, "identity": "We care about our lives, our being is an issue for us. We constantly confront the question, or issue, Who am I? (To simplify my formulations, I will refer to this question as 'the question

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of identity.’) To confront the question of identity is not to brood over one's identity. Brooding self-questioning is one way to live, but by no means common. We confront the question of identity not by reflecting on ourselves, but rather simply by living a human life. To live a life is to answer the question of identity” (Blattner 2006, 37).

9. There is a more common notion of the self that we are leaving behind here—the Cartesian conception. Heidegger maintains that the self is not a self-sufficient subject. It is instructive to note that to translate Dasein as “subject” would be misleading, due to the Cartesian baggage of the term. As Dreyfus writes, “The challenge is to do justice to the fact that Dasein names beings like you and me, while at the same time preserving the strategy of *Being and Time*, which is to reverse the Cartesian tradition by making the individual subject somehow dependent upon shared social practices” (Dreyfus 1991, 14).

10. Although I will use the term “role” for simplicity’s sake, characterizing a for-the-sake-of-which as a role is imprecise, because the meaning of “role” is not sufficiently holistic; a role is problematically context-free (see Dreyfus 1991, 95). It is acceptable to use “role” as long as we keep in mind that Heidegger’s for-the-sake-of-which is holistic. Another way to cash out for-the-sake-of-which is as the “final point” of some number of actions (see Carman 2003, 133 n. 63; Dreyfus 1991, 92). Regarding the multiplicity of for-the-sake-of-whichs, Blattner writes, “Dasein is never just one for-the-sake-of-which, but rather several or many of them at once. Jones is a simultaneous interpreter, a loyal sister, a conscientious employee, etc.” (Blattner 2002, 185 n. 15).

11. Dreyfus continues: “And each practice is connected with a lot of equipment for practicing it. Dasein inhabits or dwells in these practices and their appropriate equipment; in fact Dasein takes a stand on its being by being a more or less integrated subpattern of social practices” (Dreyfus 1991, 96).

12. A more thorough examination of identity and Dasein would lead us to a consideration of authenticity (see Carman 2005).

13. “According to Heidegger, to explain everyday transparent coping we do not need to introduce a mental representation of a goal at all. Activity can be purposive without the actor having in mind a purpose” (Dreyfus 1991, 93).

14. Dreyfus refers to what I am calling a microcosm as a mode. “Such worlds as the business world, the child’s world, and the world of mathematics, are ‘modes’ of the total system of equipment and practices that Heidegger calls the world” (Dreyfus 1991, 90). Dreyfus also uses the term “subworld” (Dreyfus 1991, 91).

15. “The phenomenological assertion that ‘Dasein is essentially Being-with’ has an existential-ontological meaning. It does not seek to establish ontically that factually I am not present-at-hand alone, and that Others of my kind occur” (Heidegger 1962, 156).

16. It is noteworthy that Heidegger takes being-with to be as foundational as being-in-the-world.

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Being-with is equiprimordial with being-in-the-world (see Heidegger 1962, 149–150). Theodore Schatzki makes the point straightforwardly: “Human existence is essentially being-in-the-world. It is equally essentially being-with” (Schatzki 2005, 233). Elsewhere, Schatzki elaborates as follows: “Heidegger's object of analysis is individual existence, but his analysis construes sociality as part of the essence of this existence” (Schatzki 2002, 184).

17. As William Blattner writes, “Dasein-with is not a distinct sort of being, but rather a more specific way in which Dasein can, indeed must, be. Heidegger writes, Dasein-with ‘is neither occurrent [present-at-hand] nor available [ready-to-hand], but rather, is *just as [so wie]* the Dasein itself who frees it’ (S&Z, p. 118). (To ‘free’ Dasein-with means to let it show up for one)” (Blattner 1999, 7 n.12, emphasis in original).

18. Consider these helpful comments on the distinction between the ontological and the ontic, by Hubert Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall: “A key element in Heidegger's argument is the distinction between the ontic and ontological . . . . Heidegger argues that traditional treatments of being have failed to adequately distinguish the two kinds of questions we can ask about being: the ontic question that asks about the properties of beings, and the ontological question that asks about ways or modes of being. Dasein, the available [aka, the ready-to-hand], and the occurrent [aka, the present-at-hand] are ontological categories. If one ontologically investigates an item of equipment, say, a pen, then one asks about the structures by virtue of which it is available or ready to hand. In an ontic inquiry, on the other hand, one asks about the properties, and the physical and relational structures peculiar to the pen” (Dreyfus and Wrathall 2002, xiii).

19. Blattner writes, “In pursuing my for-the-sakes-of-which I am engaging and sustaining the for-the-sakes-of-which of students and readers. Since the self-understanding of being a teacher is interwoven with the self-understanding of being a student, to act for the sake of being who I am is to act for the sake of others being who they are as well” (2006, 67). Heidegger writes, “Thus as being-with, Dasein ‘is’ essentially for-the-sake-of others” (Heidegger 1962, 160, quoted in Blattner). As Stephen Mulhall writes, “[A]t least in part, Dasein establishes and maintains its relation to itself in and through its relations with Others” (Mulhall 2005, 66).

20. I am not claiming that it is impossible to become a budding philosopher without a seminar context. But my position does depend upon the claim that it is common for budding philosophers to rely upon seminar contexts for identity-work. And in those common cases, sociality is essential.

21. Robert Rosenberger, drawing upon the work of the phenomenologist Aaron Gurwitsch, has made this point about technology generally, calling this phenomenon *field composition*: “With the notion of ‘field composition’, I refer to ways that some relations to technology involve substantial reorganizations of the total field of our awareness” (Rosenberger 2014, 26).

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23. Dominant stability is to be contrasted with what Don Ihde calls multistability. Rosenberger glosses Ihde's concept of multistability in this way: "Multistability refers to a technology's capacity to hold different meanings for different users, and to be used for multiple purposes" (Rosenberger 2014, 37).

24. The sociologist Jane Vincent makes a similar point about speaking on a mobile phone: "The behaviours displayed while the mobile phone is being used have less regard to the co-present, but rather it is the absent-present, the people who are connected to the user via their mobile phone, who are dominant" (Vincent 2011, 3).

25. Consider also the example of a small group of musicians making music together. In this case, for listeners and musicians, continuous listening will be essential to perceiving emerging aesthetic qualities, such as grooves and qualities of melodic and harmonic development (see Roholt 2014). We also miss something from other small-group situations when we only intermittently focus on them. For example, a theme can emerge from a dinner conversation that we might miss when only intermittently paying attention. Sherry Turkle relates a story in which the phrase—"Wait, what?"—is common for these reasons among smartphone-using college students (see Turkle 2015, ch. 1.2).

26. For an interesting discussion of related issues, see Turkle 2015, 19–20.

27. Srivastava is the Head of Emerging Technology & Emerging Economies at the International Telecommunication Union's Standardization Bureau.

28. Vincent writes, "Although the mobile phone is but one means of communication amongst a plethora of ICTs [information and communication technologies], there seems to be something that makes it appear more personal, more intimate than the fixed phone, the lap top, or the desktop computer. There is virtually nowhere you cannot take a mobile phone now. It may be that etiquette and courtesy, or regulations forbid its use in certain places (such as in places of worship, in most airplanes and so on), but even when this occurs the mobile phone is often still in a trouser or jacket pocket, handbag or briefcase, placed on silent or airplane mode and ready to be turned back on in an instant. The effect of this is to maintain a constant presence not only of the mobile phone itself but, more pertinently, of the communications, images and other personalised information that is sent, received and stored on it. At any moment this can be reached through the stimulation of the touch of the device, the thought of it, or the actual receipt of a communication from a third party" (Vincent 2011, 170).

29. Referring to a particular respondent, Vincent writes: "George could make contact with his family from his hotel room, but only with a voice call—and this was not a substitute for a late night text message, or the feeling that he could be instantly in contact using his familiar mobile with all its contacts and short cuts for communication, as well as the special ring tones for family members and other aspects of the phone he had personalised. For example, he kept the last text from many of his contact list and replied to that, rather than looking up their number" (Vincent 2011, 141).