



Our Data, Our Selves

By [Paul Chan](#)

SEPTEMBER 19, 2019



This piece appears in the [Los Angeles Review of Books Quarterly Journal: Imitation, No. 23](#)

To receive the Quarterly Journal, [become a member](#) or [purchase at our bookstore](#).

□

It seems self-evident that human cooperation is unparalleled not only by its scale, but also by the sheer variety of forms it takes. And how we communicate is decisive in how we work and play with one another.

Communication can arguably be characterized as a special form of cooperation. It is how we coordinate the array of information we send and receive. I don't think it is controversial to say that nothing good has ever come from *less* communication.

So when Facebook and Twitter emerged in the early and mid-2000s, they appeared like a natural extension of what we already do, but on an unprecedented, global scale. Social media users began to bare themselves online, sharing their opinions and feelings, plans and preferences, loves and hates, in real time. Never has the world seemed so *communable*.

And yet, after almost two decades of exponential user growth around the world, this *communability* has not resulted in higher levels of individual satisfaction or fulfillment. The opposite may be the case. Mounting anecdotal and scientific evidence suggests prolonged social media use is strongly correlated with negative effects on mental and physical health, including substance abuse, anxiety, depression, body image, and eating issues. The risk of mental health problems is exacerbated by how users measurably detract from face-to-face relationships, reducing the likelihood of meaningful activities and increasing sedentary behavior. Other studies have tried to understand the effects of limiting social media engagement, from just 30 minutes a day to no engagement at all. They all suggest a statistically significant uptick in how people perceive their well-being overall.

There are, of course, studies that seem to prove the opposite, minimizing and even contradicting the growing narrative about these detrimental effects, and there are no definitive answers so far. But beyond these open questions about the impact of social media on individuals, what seems incontrovertible is the outsize role it has played in spreading misinformation, or what we now call fake news. The damaging effects on our shared culture and politics have been profound: doubts and divisions seem to be the rule rather than the exception today as we grapple with how we recognize what is true, both online and in real life.

It is perhaps not a coincidence that the documented negative effects of social media on our health correspond to this momentous rise of misinformation (not to mention the escalating threats from trolling, hacking, and other kinds of cyber-intimidation). Social media companies by and large do not have our communicative priorities at heart. They only have their own commercial interests in mind. They are businesses after all. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, and others have enabled us to connect and share in unprecedented ways, but at the price of separating us from ourselves. This is because social media's core business model is not built upon our natural need

and desire to communicate, but the data we generate as we do so. Platforms were created with the purpose of keeping our attention and engagement, because the more we engage, the more data they collect: about who we are, what we like or dislike, what we do, and who we do it with online, and so on.

The data is the business. Companies like Facebook collect the data extracted online and then sell it to third parties. These third parties exploit the data to target social media users in order to sell them a product, a service, or an idea.

It is arguable that this is much ado about nothing. Selling things is how this country works, the story goes. What's the problem?

This is true, though there is now an unprecedented blurring of boundaries. Social media has effectively made it difficult to distinguish between different types of communication. Online, messages that are profit-driven, like advertising, resemble those that are deliberately ideological, like state-sponsored propaganda, which in turn resemble the interactions we understand as personal or private. Social media flattens the differences between advertising, propaganda, and genuine forms of exchange people partake in. It's a vicious cycle: the data collected about us is granular and detailed enough for the companies, political groups, and nation-states who buy it to create messages that look and act like authentic communication. It sometimes feels like they know you... because in truth, they do.

Personally, it has never occurred to me that my data was valuable. Generally speaking, the digital trails I leave behind are not something I think about much, if at all. Yet like everything else in the age of social media, the stakes and risks have dramatically risen. For not only is, say, your credit card information valuable, but also who you communicate with, what you buy online, what you click on, the images you post, the memes you respond to, positively or negatively, even the number of times you use a particular word in a post or comment. They have all acquired a kind of value, which is being exploited. Data collecting is, by most economic accounts, more lucrative than drilling for oil. This is why, for example, Facebook is valued at over \$175 billion.

That our data is valued by others seems clear, but what is its value to us? It is difficult to picture something one cannot see or feel, so truly reckoning with this abstract and immaterial substance called "our data" can be challenging. We may feel the effects of its exploitation and abuse but might not be able to put a finger on what "it" actually is.

Perhaps we need a way to conceptualize, or picture, what our data is to us. That conceptualization should also convey the vital significance data has in our present and future concerns. This has been done before. Think of how labels and photographs changed the attitude toward cigarettes. The dangers of smoking were difficult to comprehend until warning labels and images of cancer-infested lungs and dying patients ravaged by emphysema were introduced to the public. A picture at its best can render the true scope of an experience.

Is there a way of understanding our data that could be compelling enough to illuminate the evolving relationship between what we do online and who we are in real life?

IMAGE

I looked for that way of understanding in the past by talking with friends who are classicists. I framed it this way: “So on the one hand, our need to share who we are and what we want is a real and salient part of our lives. But this want is being industrialized and monetized beyond our control and may unduly diminish our capacity for engaging in the kind of communication that is actually enriching. And it makes me wonder if there is some analogue in the past that echoes this contemporary predicament. [Something that’s] immaterial, something one possesses but can be lost, and can be exploited by someone else if care is not taken.” Jim Porter at Berkeley replied over email:

The quickest answer to this has to be that thing called “soul.” [It is] what one owns entirely and no one else can, a thing, a characteristic, the source of our sociality, and immaterial. It can be given or taken only in the sense of life and death. It can be mined in the sense of being taken over by a distorting force, by persuasion or power.

This answer was revelatory. What we call the soul the Greeks called *psyche*, and how they thought about *psyche* is remarkably, eerily, consistent with how our data might be characterized today.

PSYCHE

The Greeks did not have just one concept of the soul, but many. The poet Pindar (518–438 BCE), for example, says, “our bodies obey Death, the Almighty, but the image of living lives on. After the death of the body, the

image of Life remains alive.” What Pindar is describing touches on one of a few common themes — the idea that the soul is a kind of image, or what the Greeks call *phantasia*. The image may be that of a living person, or something more otherworldly. Whatever the case, the soul is a representation; it could even be considered a record of whatever body it was vitally connected to. Another common theme is that the soul has the power to survive beyond the body. Its capacities outside the body vary, but for most thinkers and artists who grapple with the notion of *psyche*, the soul can exist after the body perishes, like an afterimage.

Homer thought this. Or rather, the worldview that Homer captures in the *Iliad* (around 670–640 BCE) and the *Odyssey* (620–600 BCE) holds this belief, which was common enough for it to be used as a plot device in his epics. For Homer, the soul is airy and breath-like, and once it leaves the body, it has no will or feelings of its own. It is like a shadow of the person, half-conscious, helpless, and indifferent to its circumstances. Death is not the only way the soul is released. It can also escape out of the mouth or from a gaping wound.

Where does a soul go? Homer believed it ends up in the Land of the Dead, or *Aïdēs*. There, again, soul exists as a shadow, showing little to no emotion in the underworld, and no power of influence can bring it back to the upper world. Necromancy and other forms of spirit conjuring do not exist in Homer, although they do with later poets and thinkers. For Homer, the power and the glory are reserved for the adventures of the living, and not the deceased.

The Orphics, and by extension, Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans, held another view. The Orphics (sixth century BCE) were not the only ones to differentiate themselves from the Homeric view of the soul, but they were the first to organize themselves around a set of fixed and definitive doctrines, namely the writings of Orpheus. This set the Orphics apart from other cults in antiquity. They believed human beings were duty-bound to free themselves from the shackles of their own bodies. And in opposition to the Homeric view, the Orphics believed that the body was anemic and weak, nothing more than a mere shadow of what was truly essential: the soul. This is why the soul must break out of the confines of flesh and bones. This was a cyclical struggle: once the soul was free, a simple breath of air could send it into a new body, from which it must try to escape once again.

This is the doctrine of the transmigration of the soul, the idea that this spiritual essence is sheltered in many different bodies as it tries to find its way to a divine realm. Herodotus claimed the Orphics received the doctrine

from Egyptians, but whatever its origins, the Orphics made it theirs by infusing the idea with poetry and practice. They declared the substance called the soul is what should be prized above all else in life.

From where we stand today, it is easy to dismiss Orphic beliefs as misguided and irrational. Believing in the transmigration of souls, or even the idea that there exists a spiritual “substance” that defies all known laws of the natural world, is on par with believing the Earth is flat and that vaccines kill children. They are not reasonable by any standards of thinking. But the *motivation* as to why someone might want to believe those ideas can be reasonable. What arguably led the Orphics to their particular set of beliefs is a kind of motivation that we all reasonably share, even if it doesn’t lead us to the same beliefs. Analytic philosopher Mark Johnston calls it a “future-directed concern.” This is something we do as naturally as breathing: we try to understand and feel and imagine our way into giving ourselves better chances to get by tomorrow, and the next day, and the day after that, for as far as our eyes and mind can bear to see. So it’s not difficult to imagine why the Orphics were tempted to believe in the existence of a soul: it satisfies a future-directed concern, namely how to ensure one’s survival into the future. Not just for a day or a week, but in perpetuity.

Of course, valuing the soul over everything else has attendant costs. If the soul is the most vital part of one’s life, then it makes sense to trivialize — if not altogether discard — the inessential. In the case of the Orphics, this meant *earthly existence in general*. Asceticism was the prime condition of a pious Orphic life, and it was devoted to renouncing the life of the body. Rituals of purification were enacted to cleanse the soul and wash away the contaminants the body was infested with. For followers of Orpheus, caring for the “here and now” was not as essential as being “there and forever.”

The desire to transcend one’s mortal coil in the hopes of reaching a greater beyond does not seem like something only the ancients might want. It certainly resonates as one way to describe why being on social media might be attractive. One is not beholden to a body or any lot in life when going online. There is no “here and now” to shackle what one wants to say or do on networks.

There are other resonances. *Ekstasis* is the belief and practice of raising the state of feeling in a person to a point where a higher form of consciousness and vision are made manifest. It was introduced by cults like the Orphics, who worshipped the god of ecstasy, Dionysus. The rituals are what enable the state of feeling that, among other things, creates a sense

of *disembodiment*, of gaining a kind of freedom to act and see beyond the confines of who or where one happens to be.

Ekstasis is still a part of our daily lives. I see it practiced on every subway train I take in New York, or in any line waiting for anything. In virtually every public and private space, rituals are performed that are as mannered and solemn as any cultic form of worship: the body is still, except for the fingers moving over a glowing screen or tapping on a keyboard; the face is largely fixed, as if hypnotized; the eyes dart to and fro from the images on the screen; the breath is steady, if a little on the shallow side. The body attenuates all of its regular functions to allow for a particular kind of somatic focus. The mind slips into a daydream-y trance to better take in the manifold sensations being sent and received. The shabbiness of the here and now recedes into the background of consciousness.

The motivation to escape the here and now is legitimate and reasonable, especially when our world only seems to offer ways of living that are, as Thomas Hobbes put it, “nasty, brutish, and short.” There are good socio-economic indicators that point to how, for many people, Hobbes’s description is more fact than theory. When life is so tough and mean, it will always seem to need something to complete it.

The longing to escape the here and now brings other consequences. For the Orphics, denigrating the body as an unworthy vessel naturally led to the idea that the eyes, ears, and other sensory organs were not trustworthy and should also be disavowed. So how was one supposed to make sense of the world? Here the cultic aspects of a community became decisive. The Orphics promised members of their group a relationship with something more powerful and miraculous than mere life. But belonging meant outsourcing the capacity to discern what is worthy of attention. Priestly rituals and ordinances replaced the naturally endowed senses as the means for members to orient themselves in the world.

This is a dynamic that returns over and over again. Social formations motivated by spirit, ideology, or plain old money try to profit from claims made for an enigmatic and immaterial substance that supposedly has the power to extend who we are and what we do. How this substance is described may vary, but the ways in which groups try to secure a following by providing a platform to practice and expand upon those claims are consistent then and now.

Pythagoras (570–495 BCE) and the Pythagoreans are another example. Like the Orphics, the Pythagoreans claimed the soul was immortal and divine. They also believed in the transmigration of souls and maintained that all

living beings are intimately related. But the most interesting similarity lies in their social structures. Pythagoreans, like the Orphics, organized themselves into communities that regulated members into a distinct way of living. Dietary and social prohibitions were infused with a kind of communal life that maintained the soul's unquestioned importance. Pythagoras was criticized by many of his contemporaries, but there is evidence from both modern and ancient sources that he and his followers were successful enough to hold positions of political power in what we now know as southern Italy.

It was perhaps this combination of their rising political fortunes and the ascetic, countercultural quality of their lifestyle that made them targets of criticism. It likely didn't help matters that there were extraordinary rumors surrounding Pythagoras himself. It was said he could be in two places at once. He also claimed he could recall his past lives. He could communicate with, and educate, animals. He made a wild bear promise not to endanger living things (according to Porphyry, the bear kept his oath). The earliest references to Pythagoras were skeptical at best. Herodotus mentioned backhandedly that he was not the "feeblest intellectual" (or Sophist) among the Greeks. Heraclitus claimed his wisdom was nothing but clear forms of cheating and deception.

But Pythagoras was also known for trying to understand the world in purely mathematical terms. He is remembered for attempting to find points of correspondence between numbers and reality; he tried to bridge the numerical ratios in music, mathematics, and celestial phenomena.

Aristotle later characterized the Pythagorean belief this way: "the whole heaven is harmonia and number." Even those of us who know little about math probably remember the Pythagorean theorem, which is still used to this day to figure out the relationship among the three sides of a right triangle. Pythagoras and his followers anticipated to a remarkable degree a mathematical interpretation of the world. The power of numbers to "imitate" all things is what Pythagoras taught.

Pythagoras also believed the soul was divine and distinct from the natural world and may, in fact, be fundamentally opposed to it. Whether the soul can be correlated with numbers was an open question. Pythagoras certainly thought numbers had otherworldly properties, as did the soul. Still, there seems to be no evidence suggesting that Pythagoras envisioned the soul as consisting of numbers or that it could be imitated or be described by them. But even without this direct evidence, there is an affinity between numbers and soul. In so far as this affinity exists, it is possible to see Pythagoras as the first thinker to consider the notion of the soul alongside a form of abstraction

— namely, numbers. One could even argue that this third constellation of ideas that Pythagoras pioneered had the most lasting impact on the generations of philosophers after him. Plato, Aristotle, and others would later take up this insight in their own work, expanding on this idea that the spiritual and the abstract share certain crucial qualities.

There were also philosophers after Pythagoras who took the opposite route, imagining the soul in more concrete terms. Heraclitus (540–480 BCE), for instance, considered the soul a "living fire" — constantly evolving, always already becoming, and self-vivifying. Change for the soul was both its destiny and one true pleasure. There was no personal immortality in the Heraclitian soul. This "living fire" is closer in spirit to what the Greeks called *phusis*, which roughly translates as the force that is nature, or the impersonal power that engenders life and its development in our shared world.

The relationship that binds the soul with the natural world became more explicit in Democritus (460–370 BCE). As one of the founders of Atomism, Democritus conceived all reality as being made up of the basic building blocks he called the atom. This was also the case with the soul, which he characterized unsurprisingly as made up of soul atoms. Democritus may have actually been the first thinker to deny the immortality of the soul: once the body perishes, so do the soul atoms that enlivened it.

The story so far is arguably just a rehearsal for Plato (427–347 BCE) and his conception of the soul. The soul was a subject he considered in many of his dialogues, and one can trace how Plato took in ideas from earlier thinkers, and then refashioned them to fit within his vast corpus. Perhaps this is why his understanding of the soul changes over time. In the *Apology*, he seems to accept death as either the end of a living being, or else a transition of the soul to a shadowy underworld (not unlike what Homer imagined). However, in *Phaedrus*, the soul is more Orphic in nature, falling from its divine origins and into the impurities of earthly existence by being born into a body. Echoes of Heraclitus, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, and others abound.

Plato's *Timaeus*, however, provides the most prescient and compelling explanation of what the soul is. Timaeus, who is considered an "astronomer," is asked to give his testimony to a group of other men, including Socrates, on no less than how existence and humankind came to be. Early on in his account, Timaeus claims that what binds humankind to the world is the soul. When God the creator made the universe, it was in the shape of a perfect circle: "And in the center He put Soul." Soul here is pure spiritual essence (elsewhere Plato describes it as divine); it is invisible, and it has no beginning

or end. According to Timaeus, the creator then fashioned a distinct human soul by combining the indivisible and unchanging world-soul at the center of the universe with the material “stuff” that furnishes all that exists. Timaeus goes on to describe how this was achieved:

First He took one portion from the whole; then He took a portion double of this; then a third portion, half as much again as the second portion, that is, three times as much as the first; the fourth portion he took was twice as much as the second; the fifth three times as much as the third; the sixth eight times as much as the first; and the seventh twenty-seven times as much as the first. After that He went on to fill up the intervals in the series of the powers of 2 and the intervals in the series of powers of 3 in the following manner. He cut off yet further portions of the original mixture, and set them in between the portions above rehearsed, so as to place two Means in each interval, — one a Mean which exceeded its Extremes and was by them exceeded by the same proportional part of fraction of each of the Extremes respectively.

This is a bewildering and beautiful passage. It reads like an otherworldly mathematical proof. Nowhere else in *Timaeus* does Plato use such numerical rigor, so it seems plausible that he wanted his description of the soul to be as precise and articulated as possible. The rhetorical density here is also noteworthy, as if Plato is insisting the weight of the discussion should also be felt. One can also hear echoes of Pythagoras. It is a cunning move by Plato to harness the power of numbers in order to create an original account of the soul.

Plato grasped what came before him and made it new, and arguably, more future-directed. He expressed this curious human invention called the soul not in the likeness of an image or a thing, like a shadow or fire, but in a considerably more modern manifestation: information. The quality of abstraction Pythagoras ascribes to the mystical properties of numbers has now been grafted onto the soul itself. This has the effect of making what was once thought of as pure, simple, and indivisible into something complex, and more significantly, quantifiable.

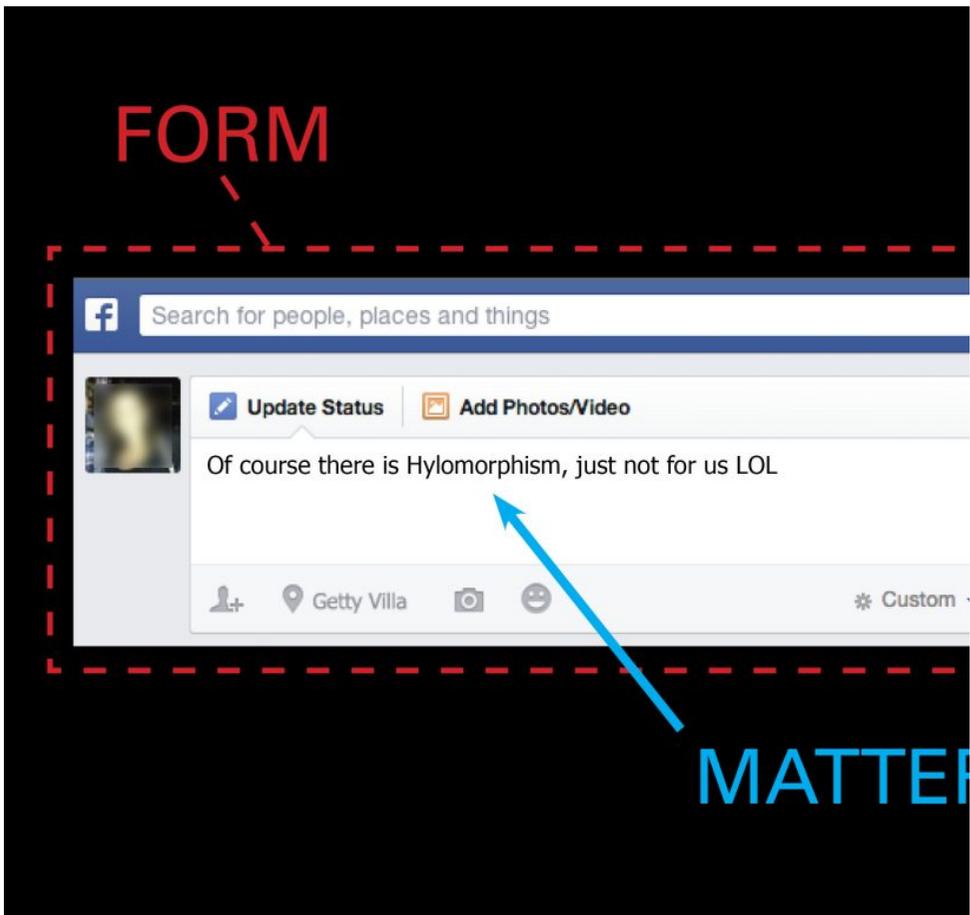
This understanding of the soul eventually culminates in one of Aristotle’s major works, *De Anima* or “On the Soul” (350 BCE). Here, the soul sheds its dogmatic and theological characters altogether. There are no more calls for purification, nor is the world made out to be a prison. The soul is home here, perhaps for the first time, with us. The central ambition of *De Anima* is to render life explanatory — capable of being described, measured, and quantified. It offers a theory of knowledge rather than a theological doctrine.

Instead of treatises on personal salvation, *De Anima* tries to study everything that the soul engenders in us: appetites, senses, memories, reason, desires. The work represents an attempt to understand what it means to live by virtue of these sets of attributes and how they make living possible in the first place.

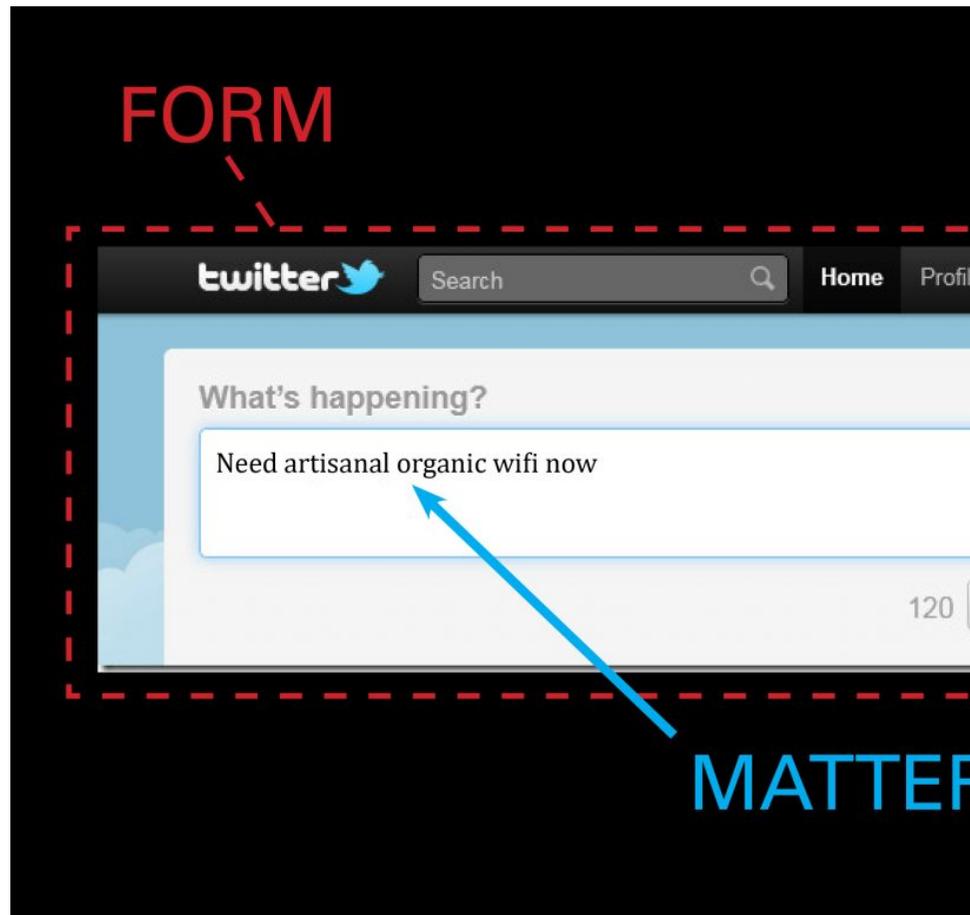
Despite Aristotle’s attempt to quantify and categorize, there remains an element of the metaphysical. But this element has been passed on to what Aristotle calls the Mind. This Mind is the undivided and pure substance that rules over the soul and all else that makes up the world, but it does so impersonally, like gravity or other forces of nature. Under the authority of Mind, the soul is set within a dualistic schema that Aristotle believes all living things embody — Form and Matter. He claims that the soul is what empowers the “potential” to realize the “actual” in living things. In other words, the soul functions like a scaffolding that supports and determines how matter might come together to create an entity that can move and think on its own, the two defining characteristics of life for Aristotle. The soul here becomes a structuring force, capable of organizing the stuff that makes up life into something that lives on. Aristotle describes it this way: “[T]he soul is substance as form.”

It is hard to picture in one’s mind what Form looks and feels like. It sounds as abstract and immaterial as the soul. But there is a contemporary way of representing Form that neatly encapsulates how Aristotle saw it. We can think of it as a framework that captures everything that is worth expressing as a semblance of what is essential and true for a living, thinking being.

It is this:



This is a form.



This is a form.

The image shows a screenshot of an Instagram profile edit form. The word "FORM" is written in large red letters at the top left. The form is titled "Instagram" and includes a search bar. On the left, there is a sidebar with options: "Edit Profile", "Change Password", "Authorized Applications", "Comments", and "Email and SMS". The main form area contains the following fields:

Name	Marcus Aurelius
Username	Stoic_Thoughtz
Website	https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marcus_Au-
Bio	"Just trying to get through the day"
PRIVATE INFORMATION	
Email	MGyeahthatemperor@gmail.com
Phone Number	+39-06-555-2595

Blue arrows point to the input fields for Name, Username, Website, Bio, Email, and Phone Number. The word "MATT" is written in large blue letters at the bottom right of the screenshot.

This is a form.

Aristotle surely did not conceive it quite like this. Still, it fits. Now, as then, a form is something we fill out with what matters in our lives. And the principal substance that motivates and underwrites this operation is every bit as valuable, vital, and immaterial as what was once called the soul. Today, we call this substance data.

DEFENSE

If it is worth believing that our so-called data bears similarities to Greek concepts of the soul, are there forms of care that the past can teach us? If we choose to bare ourselves in the great beyond called social media, can we be

guided in the way we care for our data by the way that the Greeks cared for their souls?

It may be instructive here to recall that in ancient Greece and other cultures, the existence of the soul was expressed as an aspect of ancestor worship. Caring for the souls of the departed, however, had less to do with the dead and more with the relationships between the living. Broadly speaking, ancestor worship encourages the cultivation of good relations with others, especially, but not exclusively, family members (they would, after all, become caretakers of your soul after death). Robust and authentic relationships with the living strengthen the kinds of bonds that safeguard the other essentials of life, here and in the hereafter.

How can this insight be applied to social media? The studies cited earlier all found that cultivating pro-social relationships in real life helps reduce the negative effects of prolonged social media use. To be sure, genuine and lasting bonds can be created on social media, but the platforms themselves do not bank on these bonds. Their profits are determined by the amount of data generated and collected, which means it is not the quality of engagement that matters, but the quantity. This is why misinformation, fake news, and other attention-arresting content are tolerated, and perhaps even encouraged as a style of communicating. They are designed as bait to motivate responses.

This style of communicating encourages people to behave online as if their own ties to the living have been severed, and to therefore assume no responsibility for the well-being of others. We call them bots and trolls today. These are online versions of the undead which literally feed off what the living bares, like zombies. Wisdom here may mean cultivating living relations if you are online and staying clear of interacting with the undead.

It may also be wise to practice a non-cultic outlook. This means rejecting ideas and social entities that vilify the body, and keeping a distance from rhetoric that delegitimizes the bodily senses as untrustworthy guides for comprehending experiences in the world. In other words, stay away from cults and the cult-minded.

Now, as then, a cult has recognizable social features. First and foremost, a cult is always looking for followers. There is also always a power imbalance between followers and the cult that is justified as necessary, even natural. Followers are asked to perform rituals and commit to rules the cult claims will offer a more direct and robust relationship with said powers or personalities. But in truth, they are being groomed to bond with the cult in

ways that sow doubt and confusion in the followers' minds, habituating them to trust the cult more than their own senses, and by extension, their own powers to judge and reason. The tendency for cults to socially isolate their followers from the great onrush of public life also amplifies the disorientation, which can make followers feel more vulnerable, leading them to be even more dependent on the cult for guidance and direction.

A non-cultic outlook may simply mean the capacity to discern between types of engagement that are authentic and enlivening on the one hand, and those that are deadening, insofar as they are only engaging to take something from you, whether it is your attention, your senses, or your data.

Experiences in the world are rendered by our common senses like compositions. Our capacity to see, hear, smell, taste, and feel largely determines how able we are to discern what is worthy of our attention and what is good enough to be considered true. In other words, the sensuousness of what is perceived is also what makes it intelligible. Treating our senses as if they are instruments to be refined and sharpened — as opposed to features borne of an inferior nature or the byproducts of an inconvenient vessel — helps us more skillfully distinguish between information that holds real value and misinformation.

Our senses have been extended by an array of human endeavors. Technology, engineering, and the sciences have enabled us to see further and do more than at any time. But only one field of endeavor has historically helped us hone our common senses, such as they already are. This field has helped us become more vigilant of, and sensitive to, the curious alchemy that occurs when the experiential becomes intelligible, and when the intelligible flourishes within us to offer a view of what lies beyond what is merely felt and thought that we call meaningful.

We know this field by the term Art.

□

[Paul Chan is an artist based in New York. His latest book, *Odysseus and the Bathers*, came out in March 2019.](#)

[CLOSE](#)