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A FAUSTIAN EXCHANGE: WHAT IS TO BE HUMAN IN THE ERA OF UBIQUITOUS TECHNOLOGY?

Ubiquitous computing, empathy and the self

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Abstract The paper discusses ubiquitous computing and the conception of the self, especially the question how the self should be understood in the environment pervaded by ubiquitous computing, and how ubiquitous computing makes possible direct empathy where each person or self connected through the network has direct access to others' thoughts and feelings. Starting from a conception of self, which is essentially distributed, composite and constituted through information, the paper argues that when a number of selves are connected to one another in the ubiquitous computing network, a possibility opens up where the selves can directly communicate with one another. This has a potential finally to solve the problem of other minds, and in fact any philosophical conundrum based on the supposed distinction between self and the world. When selves have direct access to others' thoughts and feelings, they know the content of others' mental states directly without having to make inferences or employing some other indirect methods. As they are interconnected through the ubiquitous network, and as they are essentially constituted through information, the selves then are spread out across the network. What this implies is that any boundary between a self and another is not as hard and fast as hitherto may have been understood. Toward the end, the paper also discusses how freedom and autonomy are still possible in this ubiquitously networked world.

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1 Introduction

Ubiquitous computing is a new kind of computing technology where the computing power resides not only in the computers with which we are all familiar, but also in everyday, familiar devices not usually thought of as computing. A refrigerator, for example, is not usually thought of as a computing device, but with ubiquitous computing technology, the refrigerator can become enmeshed in a wide ranging network that receives and sends signals through wireless networks. In this sense, the refrigerator becomes "smart" in the sense that it can "make a decision" to send out signals to the grocery store if certain segment of the stuff inside is running out. If allowed, this signaling can take place without the owner being notified, just as certain programs in today's computer can update themselves through the network without having to ask for permission explicitly from the owner every time. According to Mark Weiser (1991, 1993a, b), the technology should make itself disappear by weaving itself into the fabric of everyday life. This is to say that the computing technology will become ubiquitous through having thoroughly and imperceptibly permeated into our lives so that, in effect, computing devices and our normal lives will become one.[1]

In this paper, I would like to discuss ubiquitous computing and the conception of the self, how the self should

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[1] There are currently many terms that refer to closely related phenomenon. Apart from "ubiquitous computing," another phrase that is being used is "pervasive computing." According to the National Institute of Standards and Technologies (NITS), *pervasive* computing refers to devices that are numerous, casually accessible, often invisible; thus, it is essentially the same kind of technology as ubiquitous computing. In fact, the two terms are being used interchangeably in the literature (NITS 2001).