

Beyond Originality: The Birth of Profificity from the Spirit of Postmodernity

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Abstract: This paper discusses the relation between the transition from authenticity (a technology for shaping identity through the pursuit of originality) to “profificity” (a technology for shaping identity through the curation, display, and validation of profiles) and the transition towards postmodernist philosophy in the 19th and 20th century. By analyzing core passages from the works of Friedrich Nietzsche, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard, it is argued that their philosophies of interpretation, language-games, signs, and simulation are compatible with modes of identity formation under conditions of profificity. More specifically, it is suggested that performative, immanent, and constructivist views of interpretation, language, signs, and hyperreality typical of postmodernism correspond to a performative, immanent and constructivist conception of (individual and collective) identity in profificity.

Keywords: profificity, authenticity, identity, postmodernity

Introduction: From Authenticity to Profificity

It seems that the “age of authenticity” that Charles Taylor spoke of¹ is waning and giving way to “profificity”: a technology for shaping (individual or collective) identity through the curation of profiles.² In the mode of authenticity, identity is to be achieved by finding or creating an original self and expressing it truthfully. An almost emblematic formulation of the “authentic imperative” in the 19th century was coined by Friedrich Nietzsche in several variations in both his published and

¹ See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

² See Hans-Georg Moeller and Paul D’Ambrosio, *You and Your Profile: Identity after Authenticity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021).

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unpublished works: “Become who you are!”³ Notions of authentic self-discovery, self-creation, or self-actualization later permeated not only 20th century existentialist philosophy (Heidegger, Sartre, etc.) but also informed a mainstream political discourse centering on individuals and their rights. This discourse eventually gave rise to both opposing wings of the present culture wars raging in North America and Europe: a supposedly leftist “identity politics” and supposedly right wing “identitarian” or conservative factions championing “sovereign individuality” (as famously propagated by Jordan Peterson, one of the globally most influential public intellectuals today).⁴ In short, as an identity technology, authenticity pursues originality, and this very pursuit has been socially, politically, psychologically, and culturally formative for many individuals born and raised in the 20th century.

Authenticity, however, is inherently paradoxical, and its inner contradictions have become increasingly evident: if everyone pursues originality, this very pursuit is no longer original. In times of ubiquitous mass and social media, individuals learn how to be authentic by copying images of others whom they perceive to be authentic. Advertising, for instance, has been marketing authenticity as a consumer good to the masses and thereby simultaneously proliferated and discredited it.

The evident self-contradictions of authenticity, however, have not yet shattered the vocabulary of identity and originality which, as mentioned, still abounds in political, cultural, and commercial language. From a traditional authenticity perspective, “hell is other people”, as Sartre famously had one of the characters in his play *No Exit* exclaim:⁵ Individual authenticity is chronically threatened by the inauthenticity of conforming to the expectations of others. Similarly, for Heidegger, *das Man*, the anonymous social “they,” ontically obstructs the pursuit of authenticity. While the authentic individual may well yearn for and need other authentic individuals for its recognition, the individual must always remain sovereign. Authenticity can only be authenticated by an inner self. In authenticity,

³ See for instance *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (Gay Science) 270; *Also sprach Zarathustra* (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*) IV, *Das Honig-Opfer* (The Honey Sacrifice), and the posthumously published fragments NF-1876, 19[40], NF-1881, 11[297] in Nietzsche’s *Digitale Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Digital critical edition of the complete works and letters*, based on the critical text by Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, Berlin/New York, de Gruyter 1967, edited by Paolo D’Iorio, <<http://www.nietzschesource.org/#eKGWB>>. All references to texts by Nietzsche in this paper follow this database and all translations of these texts are mine.

⁴ See for instance Peterson’s lecture “The Meaning and Reality of Sovereign Individuality.” YouTube video, 1:25:58, posted by Jordan B Peterson (28 July 2109), <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JpA5iDpnrw>>, which as of October 2, 2022, has nearly one million views.

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *No Exit*, trans. by Stuart Gilbert, <https://www.vanderbilt.edu/olli/class-materials/Jean-Paul_Sartre.pdf>.

ultimate two (or more) original selves recognize one another. In proficity, however, this changes. Here, the focus shifts from the discovery of an original self to the display of a profile, and from the recognition by another original self to public attention, approval, and acclaim: Profiles derive their value from public validation.

In proficity, the old Nietzschean motto of authenticity is modified to “become who you wish to be seen as.” Applying the terminology of Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory, the shift from authenticity to proficity can be described as a shift towards thoroughgoing “second-order observation.” While in authenticity recognition, including self-recognition, is supposed to emanate from authentic selves who see what they see in the mode of individual first-order observation, in proficity observation is more complex and is fascinated by observing how and what *others* observe.

A paradigmatic example of a profile is a brand. When we observe a commodity in terms of its brand, we do not simply observe the commodity directly, but perceive how the commodity is being perceived in public, e.g., on the market or in advertising. When we see, for instance, an apple-shaped logo on a computer, we no longer simply see the device as a device but *as a Mac*. We understand the “identity” of the device in the eyes of the “general peer,” the trans-individual mass of people who are familiar with the meaning of the logo. The logo is the visualization of the brand, and it provides information on the profile of the object. This profile relates not directly to the object but signifies it via its public observation. Accordingly, a decisive distinction between authenticity and proficity is the orientation to first-order observation in the case of the former and the orientation to second-order observation in the case of the latter. In other words, while the original self emerges in its very originality in the mode of first-order observation, the profile’s visibility and validity emerge in second-order observation.

The purpose of the present paper is to provide a philosophical addendum to the momentous shift from first-order observation to second-order observation. Instead of looking at this shift in further detail, I wish to examine here some parallel developments in intellectual history to contextualize the rise of proficity more broadly. More or less simultaneously with the consolidation of a philosophy of authenticity in the 20th century, for instance in the existentialist philosophies of Heidegger, Sartre, and de Beauvoir, alternative philosophical frameworks were elaborated and paved the way for what later came to be known as postmodernist thought. Unlike, for instance, Niklas Luhmann’s social systems theory, however, 19th and 20th-century pre-postmodernist and postmodernist thinkers, tended not to present sociological theories. Instead, at least initially, they focused on theories of interpretation, signs, or language. In this essay, I briefly trace a few postmodernist philosophies of interpretation, signs and language, and their

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immediate predecessors which historically coincided with, and arguably supported, the demise of authenticity. It is crucial to see, I believe, how these developments in philosophy moved away from understanding the meaning of language or signs as an expression of subjective ideas or objective meaning—and thus implicitly broke with the age of authenticity and its reference to originality. Instead, they proposed alternative conceptions of the significance of interpretations, language games, and the interplay of signs and symbols beyond originality.

Predecessors of Profilicity

a) Friedrich Nietzsche

While Friedrich Nietzsche can be rightfully claimed as a major philosophical spokesperson of authenticity, he can equally be regarded as a pre-postmodernist and early predecessor of profilicity. Nietzsche's works are often contradictory, or, to put it more positively, highly ambiguous, and it is quite futile to attempt reducing his writings—which are deliberately unsystematic, metaphorical, and ironic—to any particular “ism” or unequivocal position. Especially in his later texts from the 1880s, including the posthumously published *Nachlass* notes, Nietzsche questions not just traditional metaphysical notions of transcendent, transcendental, or objective truth, but also modern concepts of subjectivity and agency. His various critiques, scattered and fragmented as they are, amount to a series of doubtful reflections on notions of originality and loosely formulate a philosophy of interpretation.

A crucial passage expressing a critique of originality in Nietzsche's published works is the section on “The Four Great Errors” in *Twilight of the Idols* (first published in 1889). The four great errors all concern the postulation of *Ursachen*—i.e., causes or origins. Nietzsche questions the common assumption of conscious volition (of humans or Gods), or of a first cause, as the origin of certain intended consequences. While not discarding the concept of cause or origin altogether, Nietzsche suggests that human originality is a fiction that emerges in the context of larger organic life processes (including physiological and psychological processes) into which humans are inextricably integrated. In particular, Nietzsche speaks of an *Ursachentrieb*, a causality or originality drive enticing humans to erroneously ascribe agency to themselves. To illustrate the imaginary invention of human originality, Nietzsche brings up the example of someone asleep hearing a far-away cannon shot. In response to the noise, the sleeper may dream up a story that explains its origin and revolves about the sleeper him- or herself as its main protagonist. Eventually, Nietzsche suggests in section five of “The Four Great

Errors,” such ascriptions of origins emerging from the human *Ursachentrieb* have formed certain “systems” (*System*) of meaning, so that whatever may happen, “the banker immediately thinks about business, the Christian about ‘sin,’ and the girl about her love.” While not using such postmodernist terminology, Nietzsche clearly stipulates here that individual agency and human originality are fictional effects of socially constructed narratives and their interpretative frameworks.

Several notes from Nietzsche’s *Nachlass* from the second half of the 1880s correspond to the critique of originality in *The Four Great Errors*. In 1887, Nietzsche wrote:

“Subject” – *interpreted* from our point of view. So that the I is regarded as substance, as origin of all deeds, as doer. The logical-metaphysical postulates, the belief in substance, accident, attribute, etc. takes its credibility from the habit to regard all our deeds as a consequence of our will—so that the I as substance does not enter into the multiplicity of change. – But there is no will.⁶

The notion of the intentional self as the origin of agency is discredited here by Nietzsche. The subject is explicitly depicted as an *interpretation*. But who is the interpreter manufacturing this interpretation? Nietzsche says:

Is it finally necessary to put the interpreter still behind the *interpretation*? Already this is poetry, hypothesis. In as far as the word “understanding” (*Erkenntniß*) has meaning at all, the world is understandable, but it is interpretable in different ways; there is no meaning behind it, but it has uncountable meanings, “perspectivism.”⁷

There is no particular human (or divine) interpreter as the origin of stories of origination and ascriptions of meaning “behind” the world. Different perspectives produce different interpretations. The meanings of these interpretations are not due to any objective truths or intentions of subjective agents but emerge from shifting points of view within larger historical and evolutionary developments.

⁶ NF-1887, 9[98].

⁷ NF-1886, 7[60].

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b) Ludwig Wittgenstein

In Ludwig Wittgenstein's writings, many of which were published posthumously, reflections on language and signs are of prime importance. Although Wittgenstein only rarely refers to other philosophers and does not tend to argue from a historical point of view (unlike Nietzsche and many other thinkers of the 19th century), his concern with language and signs seems to be at least indirectly connected with the growing interest in questions of interpretation, perspectives, and meaning found in Nietzsche and other thinkers at the end of 19th and in the early 20th century. An important historical link between Nietzsche and Wittgenstein was the writer and philosopher Fritz Mauthner (1849-1923). In a number of works on language, Mauthner varied and expanded the Nietzschean idea of language as a system of interpretations that does not reveal truth but constructs complex systems of meaning.⁸ Wittgenstein, in turn, read Mauthner and seems to have been significantly influenced by the latter's methodological "critique of language" (*Sprachkritik*).⁹

In a post-Nietzschean manner, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* begin with a fundamental doubt regarding a traditional commonsense understanding of language (which Wittgenstein ascribes to St. Augustine), namely that it is an assemblage of words which all have some specific "meaning" by their reference to the "things" they represent. Seen in this traditional way, language is a system of signs that represents the world of things—and/or the thoughts about things and the world. Large parts of the *Philosophical Investigations* are aimed at challenging this representational conception of language and signs and try to replace it with an alternative view of language based on the *use* (*Gebrauch*) of signs which results in the practice of *language games* (*Sprachspiele*). This alternative view switches from a representational conception of language and signs to a performative one. The use of language consists according to Wittgenstein in a wide variety of activities including ordering, describing, reporting, playing, joking, etc. as outlined in *Philosophical Investigations* 23. Importantly, such a performative view of language resonates with Nietzsche's point that there is no meaning "behind" the world that constitutes "interpretations." Similar to Nietzsche's

⁸ Fritz Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, (3 volumes, Stuttgart: Cotta, 1901–1902); Fritz Mauthner, *Die Sprache* (Frankfurt: Rütten & Loenig, 1907); Fritz Mauthner, *Wörterbuch der Philosophie: Neue Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*. (Munich: Georg Müller, 1910).

⁹ A short reference to Mauthner is included in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* 4.0031. On Mauthner and his influence on Wittgenstein see Gerald Hartung, *Beyond the Babylonian Trauma: Theories of Language and Modern Culture in the German-Jewish Context*. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 116-152.

notion of interpretations as perspectival and contingent constructions of meaning rather than as revelations of a transcendent or transcendental truth, Wittgenstein conceives of language and signs not as indicative of an objective or subjective reality that determines meaning, but as a playful activity or “life form” (*Lebensform*) that produces rather than expresses meaning.

The *Philosophical Investigations* include numerous short dialogues of Wittgenstein with himself. Reminiscent of Zen-Buddhist koans (公案), they often do not contain any propositions or explicit conclusions. Instead, they may end with a puzzling question and are perhaps intended to illustrate the very practice of philosophical language games. One of these puzzling dialogues in *Philosophical Investigations* 504 goes: “But if you say: ‘How am I to know what he means, when I see nothing but the signs he gives?’ then I say: ‘How is he to know what he means, when he has nothing but the signs either?’”¹⁰

In language, we “have nothing but the signs.” Whenever we ask for the meaning of a sign, this meaning will be outlined with other signs that are provided to us. In language, the pure meaning as such or on its own never appears. It is similarly elusive in language as things in themselves are in experience. For Wittgenstein, however, this elusiveness is not a problem. To the contrary, he insists in *Philosophical Investigations* 503, that we are perfectly content with signs and that there is no need to find their meaning beyond or behind language whenever we are playing a language game:

If I give anyone an order, I feel it to be quite enough to give him signs. And I should never say: this is only words, and I have got to get behind the words. Equally, when I have asked someone something and he gives me an answer (i.e., a sign) I am content—that was what I expected—and I don't raise the objection: but that's a mere answer.¹¹

If, in language, we do not, and cannot, get behind the words, and if the purpose of our language games is not to leave the words behind in order to get to pure meaning—then, as Wittgenstein stipulates in *Philosophical Investigations* 118, his reflections may be discarded as futile since they can be taken to destroy everything “that is great and important.”¹² However, Wittgenstein responds to this self-doubt, what is destroyed—the assumed great and important things and ideas beyond language—are edifices made

¹⁰ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigation*, trans. by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), 139.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹² *Ibid.*, 48.

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from thin air (*Luftgebäude*), and his philosophy uncovers the linguistic ground on which they have been built.

Not unlike Nietzsche's reversal of cause and effect with regard to human agency and "free will," Wittgenstein reverses the traditional ascription of origination with regard to language and meaning. For Nietzsche, the sovereign "I" is not the cause, but the effect of perspectival interpretations, while, for Wittgenstein, ideas and things are not the origin from which language derives its meaning, but, to the contrary, language is the ground on which the meaning of signs is constructed. And this ground is, as Wittgenstein metaphorically says in *Philosophical Investigations* 107, *rauh*, or "rough."¹³ Language is not divinely pre-established, a priori rationally structured, or teleologically geared toward perfection, but a contingent, complex game resisting systematic surveillance. What is more, philosophy takes place on this ground just like any other social and intellectual activity and is therefore not in any privileged position to analyze it or to reach beyond its limits. As Wittgenstein wrote in the Preface to the *Philosophical Investigations*, the very nature of these investigations—a series of reflections on the rough ground of language on which they move along—precluded them from ever becoming a systematic whole. Instead, as Wittgenstein poetically says, they resemble sketches of landscapes made on long and winded journeys.¹⁴ This apt metaphor would probably also describe Nietzsche's pre-postmodernist philosophical method rather well.

c) Jacques Derrida

A rather early, but highly influential essay by Jacques Derrida on "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences"¹⁵ combines Nietzsche's theses on interpretation with Wittgenstein's musings on language and play. In this essay, which was based on a lecture Derrida had presented at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore in October 1966, Nietzsche is referenced several times, but Wittgenstein is not. Nevertheless, intentionally, or not, Wittgensteinian themes are clearly present in Derrida's philosophy in general and in his philosophy of signs and their *différance* (difference) in particular.¹⁶

¹³ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vii.

¹⁵ The essay is included in Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 278-284. This book was originally published as *L'écriture et la différence* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1967).

¹⁶ See Henry Staten, *Wittgenstein and Derrida* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

Toward the end of “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Derrida distinguishes quite programmatically “two interpretations of interpretation of structure, of sign, of freeplay.” The first one corresponds to a traditional European metaphysics and humanism and “seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering, a truth or an origin which is free from freeplay and from the order of the sign, and lives like an exile the necessity of interpretation.” The second one, “to which Nietzsche showed us the way,” is “no longer turned toward the origin, affirms freeplay and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology—in other words, through the history of all of his history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of the game.”¹⁷ Clearly, Derrida credits Nietzsche here for overcoming an obsession with metaphysical truth as the foundation of language, meaning, and life. After Nietzsche Derrida suggests, the *Ursachentrieb*—the originality drive—could eventually be left behind. The “two interpretations of interpretations” are set apart from one another precisely with regard to their different attitude towards originality. The crucial difference is that the new “interpretation” is “no longer turned toward the origin,” and instead “affirms freeplay.”

Derrida’s notion of “freeplay” resonates deeply with Wittgenstein’s conception of “language games.” What Derrida calls the “metaphysics of presence” corresponds to the commonsense traditional understanding of language scrutinized in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, namely the assumption that it consists of representational signs denoting present things or thoughts of them. Similar to Wittgenstein who points out the unsurmountable elusiveness of the assumed presence “behind” language—given the fact that once we use language, we “have nothing but the signs”—Derrida intends to shatter the metaphysics of presence “with the help of the concept of the *sign*.” He proposes that once it is understood that “there is no transcendental or privileged signified” accessible via the sign, “the domain or the interplay of signification has, henceforth, no limit.”¹⁸

To summarize, the traditional notion of “interpretation” that Derrida wants to overcome with the help of Nietzsche rests on a “metaphysics of presence” which in turn is engrained in a conception of language, or a semiotics, based on the distinction between present primary objects or thoughts that are represented by secondary language or signs. Derrida, however, follows Wittgenstein in “liberating” the sign from its subordination to presence as its mere representative. In a language game, or in “freeplay,” signs are no longer limited “to a privileged reference, to an origin, or to an

¹⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 292.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 281.

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absolute *arche*.”¹⁹ Instead, in the form of play, signs are “the disruption of presence” since “the presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain.”²⁰ In Derrida’s understanding, the signifier and the signified, which in their relation to one another constitute the sign, are not splitting up a gap between presence and representation but open up a domain of signification in their interplay of mutual substitution and differentiation.

d) Jean Baudrillard

Ten years after Derrida had given his lecture on “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” his French compatriot Jean Baudrillard published another seminal postmodernist text, the book *L’échange symbolique et la mort*,²¹ or *Symbolic Exchange and Death*,²² varying once more themes of signification, language, and meaning beyond the traditional “metaphysics of presence” and the pursuit of origins. Baudrillard was clearly influenced not only by Derrida’s philosophy of *différance* and of the “freeplay” of signs, but also by quite a few other French postmodernist thinkers including, for instance Guy Debord or Michel Foucault, who had been eclipsing French existentialists like Sartre, de Beauvoir, or Albert Camus in popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In essence, Baudrillard provided a somewhat more precise vocabulary for the philosophy of interpretation, language, and signs that had already been developed by thinkers like Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and Derrida before him. Baudrillard, however, integrated this philosophy of signification into a broader social and cultural critique with a certain Marxist bent. Unlike his earlier predecessors, but quite in line with already mentioned contemporaries like Debord and Foucault, Baudrillard assumed the role of a public intellectual always ready to comment on unfolding political events and unafraid of mass media attention.

About a decade after Derrida had already shattered the “metaphysics of presence,” Baudrillard proclaimed quite dramatically the “death of reference,” in the context of several other demises, including the “end of labor,” the “end of production,” the “end of the political economy,” and, importantly, the “end of the signifier/signified dialectic.”²³ For Baudrillard, the death of reference meant that “referential value is annihilated, giving the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 286.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 292.

²¹ Jean Baudrillard, *L’échange symbolique et la mort* (Paris: Gallimard, 1976).

²² Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death*, trans. by Iain Hamilton Grant (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE, 1993).

²³ *Ibid.*, 8.

structural value of play the upper hand.” This upper hand, he explained, now belonged to “a total relativity, general commutation, combination and simulation;” adding that ‘simulation means that “from now on signs are exchanged against each other rather than against the real.” Simulation can be further understood, according to Baudrillard as an “emancipation of the sign” which is now released from its “‘archaic’ obligation to designate something” and thus “finally becomes free, indifferent, and totally indeterminate, in the structural or combinatory play which succeeds the previous rule of determinate equivalence.”²⁴

Under conditions of simulation, the real is replaced with the “hyperreal” —another term Baudrillard successfully coined—or branded. As opposed to the real which is subject to reproduction, or representation, the hyperreal is, according to Baudrillard, “that which is always already reproduced” and as such “beyond representation.”²⁵ The formulation “always already” is perhaps the most often used phrase not only in Baudrillard’s texts but in postmodernist academic literature as a whole. It indicates, true to the critique of originality, the lack of a transcendent or transcendental grounding, or of an “absolute presence” that *precedes* its representation. Once the hyperreal is there, the assumption of the real makes no longer sense. As Baudrillard says: “Today reality itself is hyperrealist,” and “reality has passed completely into the game of reality,” so that “the real and the imaginary are intermixed in one and the same operational totality.”²⁶

Although, as mentioned, Baudrillard speaks in relation to simulation of the “emancipation of the sign,” he hardly celebrates the replacement of the real by the hyperreal as a form of liberation. To the contrary, more often than not, he depicts the hyperreal in consumerist and capitalist contexts. More than Derrida, Wittgenstein, or Nietzsche, Baudrillard seems to lament and bemoan the irreversible loss of the real. It is therefore questionable if Baudrillard should be classified as a “straightforward” postmodernist thinker, or perhaps more as a postmodernist critic of the postmodern condition.

Be that as it may, Baudrillard shares a certain paradoxical trait with other French postmodernist thinkers mentioned above: While they all agreed on the demise of originality and authenticity, they seemed intent on signaling their own originality by expressing themselves in a highly manneristic style. This manneristic style reproduced the paradox of authenticity: Similar to the “jargon of authenticity” Adorno ascribed to Heidegger,²⁷ postmodernist

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

²⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Jargon der Eigentlichkeit. Zur deutschen Ideologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1964).

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French writers competed against one another in the promulgation of a half scholarly, half artistic self-referential and eventually repetitive discourse ripe with jargon and catchphrases. Ironically, they seem to have pursued originality by means of an increasingly conventional critique of originality. This is not to say, however, that the concepts of *différance* (Derrida), or of simulation and the hyperreal (Baudrillard), which they developed in the wake of Nietzsche, Wittgenstein, and others are not very helpful for conceptualizing the present. They all contribute to the transition from authenticity to proficity.

Conclusion: Postmodernity and Proficity

The preceding very brief and highly selective survey of a few pre-postmodernist and postmodernist thinkers was meant to indicate the compatibility of their philosophies with the identity technology of proficity. This compatibility is rooted in a *rejection of originality* and of the idea that expressions in language or signs represent a primary, essential, or “present” meaning beyond the realm of language or signification. The performative, immanent, and constructivist views of interpretation, language, signs, and hyperreality typical of postmodernism correspond to a performative, immanent, and constructivist conception of (individual and collective) identity in proficity.

Similar to Nietzsche’s philosophy of interpretation, the “meaning” of a profile has no subjective or objective origin. A profile, like a brand, is continuous work in progress constructing and re-constructing a certain “perspective.” The meaning of the brand identity *Apple* does not originate from the properties of the technical devices sold with this logo. The brand also does not express any original “idea” attached to those devices by their makers or inventors. In the context of successful advertising—a success which consists to a large extent in a flexible curation of the brand—a certain *Apple* “perspective” is invented and established. Eventually, *Apple* becomes a profile that emerges through the proliferation of a dynamic interpretation of the cultural and symbolic meaning of this brand. This dynamic interpretation is shared widely throughout society and offers all those who purchase an *Apple* product not just the product, but, importantly, an interpretation of their own identity that is aligned with the identity of the product. Through the shared interpretation of the brand, the profiles of the company and the profiles of the individuals purchasing its products merge in a feedback loop: the customers become “cool individuals” because they own a product by a cool brand, and the brand becomes cool because its products are bought by cool customers. In effect, the creation of the identity profile *Apple* functions similarly to Nietzsche’s dream of the cannon shot. In response to some noise

(advertising of the brand), a shared interpretation (in the form of a profile) is constructed which almost magically constructs intentionality, subjectivity, and identity although there has been “no meaning behind it.”

If a language game functions well and creates a life form, as Wittgenstein pointed out, there is no need to “get behind the words.” The game is played with language and signs, and the point is to respond to someone else’s words with more words. This is to say, to understand a language game is to be able to actually *play* it, and not to “get to the bottom” of what the language game may “mean.” Profiles share such a performative orientation with language games. The point of presenting and curating a personal profile on social media, let’s say for instance on Facebook or Tinder, is not primarily to allow others to better understand one’s “original self,” but to mutually engage in a “game” that consists in the exchange of signs and words and that has the purpose of mutually constructing and validating one another’s identity in an interactive way. Varying Wittgenstein’s point in *Philosophical Investigations* 503 quoted above, it can be said: “When I have posted something on social media and someone gives a reply (i.e., a sign) I am content—that was what I expected—and I don’t raise the objection: but that’s a mere reply.” Profiles are signs signifying identity; and in accordance with Wittgenstein’s philosophy, their meaning is to be found in their performative use in society, that is in their communication with other signs. The profile that no one responds to has no meaning.

If the profile that no one responds to has no meaning, the profile does not represent a “privileged reference,” “origin,” or “an absolute *arche*” and thereby is not indicative of the “metaphysics of presence” debunked by Derrida. Instead, profiles are, as Derrida says about signs in general, a “signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences.” The profile of an academic, like myself, is shaped and curated by writing and publishing papers like this one. The meaning of this paper, and thereby of my academic profile, cannot be understood properly by grasping unique and original ideas—it doesn’t express any such thing. Instead, the paper can only be understood by reference to other academic papers and publications on postmodernist and pre-postmodernist philosophy. Even if, for instance, I criticize the use of academic jargon by some philosophers here, this criticism itself is inscribed in previous academic criticisms of the same kind and thus a kind of jargon itself. My paper, and my academic profile makes sense not because of any “authenticity” of my ideas, but because of the *différance* it inserts into “the movement of a chain” that Derrida metaphorically spoke of to illustrate the “freeplay” of signs.

If profiles are not representations of a present identity, but virtual curations of selfhood emerging along with the “movement of the chain” of collective interpretations and language games, they are hyperreal simulations

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and “always already” copied, as Baudrillard could have put it. Like avatars in a computer game, profiles are playfully enacted characters that one can adopt, develop, and be personally invested in. They do not represent an original self that precedes them but provide an opportunity to curate and perform individual selfhood. Baudrillard rightly criticized how the simulation of selfhood is entrenched in a capitalist consumer culture and, it sometimes seems, yearned for a return to authenticity. Such a return to the origins, however, is impossible if originality itself is “always already” unoriginal.

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