

# *Virtually You* by Elias Aboujaoude

Notes by Neekaan Oshidary

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## Preface

Opens with the interesting thought of managing one's online identity after one has passed away. Speaks of problem of changed personality online that transfers online. Personality traits include: grandeur, narcissism, impulsiveness, childlike regression, sex and romantic dangers, and others. Concludes by acknowledging the great good from technology, though this is not the purpose of this book. Will focus on the dangers and pitfalls, of which he claims to harbor no illusions.

## Ch 1: E-Personality

Basic thesis is that the Internet has given rise to an e-personality: a kind of version of ourselves that behaves differently online than our usual offline selves. This online behavior and personality then bleeds into offline life. The e-personality is characterized by 5 traits: (1) grandiosity, (2) narcissism, (3) darkness (morbidly), (4) regression (immaturity), and (5) impulsivity. Aboujaoude provides examples of extreme disturbances to people's lives. For example, Richard used to engage in unproblematic gambling at Reno or for an occasional weekend at an Indian casino, but then he became addicted to online gambling, leading to familial and work problems. Liz who never had catastrophic shopping habits now compulsively shops online to the point of destroying her credit and going bankrupt. And other individuals present themselves as a better, new-and-improved self: Jill is a socially anxious 30 year old English teacher who falsely repaints herself as more revealing sales rep as she enters an online dating relationship. Unfortunately for her, her virtual love poses as a doctor, but is really a pharmacist who is lower on the alpha male ladder he falsely tries to climb.

The thesis of the e-personality claims that we are not all pathological. The e-personality can be far more subtle, as it is for the majority of people who use the Internet. However, for problematic cases, Aboujaoude draws on the Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD; currently referred to as “dissociative identity disorder”) literature to suggest a grounding for the e-personality. He suggests that the e-personality is a dissociated identity from our usual selves. Those who have certain proclivities toward dissociation, addiction, or obsessive, compulsive behavior may be at risk of more severe problems. He also tries to ground these claims in neurobiological studies of MPD, gambling, and videogame addiction. For example, PET studies have found dopamine activity involved in playing some videogames uses the same reward and pleasure systems as those involved in sex, eating, and gambling.

Central to the e-personality is a kind of online disinhibition. Traditionally culture, religion, or social contract often kept our compulsive behaviors better in check, but when it’s just you in front of your computer screen, many of these checks are no longer there (e.g. consider real life gambling vs. online gambling). The e-personality may come across as more productive, efficient, powerful, and free. But this is a risky illusion with costs.

## Ch 2: Delusions of Grandeur

This chapter explores the origins of Silicon Valley’s boom of “irrational exuberance.” Aboujaoude first offers anecdotes of his once med school colleague who dropped school to chase the tech gold-rush among one of many startups trying to score big with the DotCom boom. A kind of manic-y exuberance of big dreams and successful slogans like successful Amazon CEO, Jeff Bezos, captures the ethos of the time: “Get big fast.” This exuberance was possible because of the unique economic, legal, and ethical vacuum that Silicon Valley’s tech world operated in. Parallels to the Wild West abound where fast movers can quickly reign in on bounty’s that are speedily ahead of any regulation or oversight.

While the irrational exuberance met its demise with the DotCom bust, its ethos transferred into a more personal manifestation in ordinary people. The internet provides a kind of “anything-is-possible”, “sky is the limit” kind of thinking where one can attain exactly what they want: find the perfect mate, mortgage, exact appliance item you want off Amazon. More so, everyone has a kind democratic chance of online 15 minutes of fame. Take Matt Harding who went to college to travel around the globe filming himself dancing: he became a Youtube sensation. Memes that people create have the ability to catch on like wildfire; they spread rapidly and horizontally, but are short-lived and often intellectually shallow and free of nuance or complexity.

The interesting insight that Aboujaoude draws is that our culture of memes revolves around “triangular” desire. Culture has always been a medium of imitation as we learn from others, but

also we desire what other people desire. We look to the neighbors who are getting the new refinancing on their mortgage to think we want that too, or we see other online dating and think we need that too. The grandiosity and dreams of this era are risky like the example of Webvan: these visions have a limited shelf life where dreams can vanish overnight.

## Ch 3: Narcissism

The Internet has become a playpen for feeding narcissism. Narcissists have an overly large sense of self-importance and only want to associate with other “special” people who they think deserve the same high level of admiration. The Internet with its shift toward personalized “me” oriented services seeks to cater to your specific individualized needs and desires. From the many “i” apps (think iEverything) to personalized news feeds and email digests like “Very Short List” to virtual bubble wrap and the Zit Popper app, you can feed every personalized interest and craving in a self-tailored way. Facebook especially becomes a major opportunity for narcissistic activity. On the social network narcissists are more active, which leads to narcissists being overly represented on what you see on Facebook. There have also been studies where narcissism indices (the Narcissist Personality Inventory (NPI)) have been linked to greater activity on Facebook. Facebook can become a self-presentation vehicle much like self-advertising.

The danger of these self-promoting tools is that they may lead to being able to totally reinvent oneself in the virtual sphere. The mask of reinvention has always been part of our culture (think Halloween, Mardi Gras, etc.), but Aboujaoude claims now we have an ability to widen the gap between our actual self and the ideal we want to be, which can be constructed virtually. Virtual tools enable us to become our Platonic ideals, demigods, or even godlike. Just like Plato’s Forms, we have the ability to craft ourselves into something that simply doesn’t exist in the far cruder, imperfect reality of life. Online, as in Second Life, we can enter into “god-mode.”

This godlike recreation is captured by a few therapy room encounters of Aboujaoude. Alex leaves his real life girlfriend Natalie for his Second Life love Natalie, who he helped “hand-craft” by specially designing many of her virtual features. Aboujaoude’s thesis is that this virtual reality creates a hallucinatory- or psychotic-like breaks from reality. The break from reality stems from some problematic pain in the real world that is somehow avoided through the virtual world. The painful realities of one’s weaknesses can be escaped through the self-distortion and enhancement provided virtually. Other stories include Wendy, a bipolar who found her Middle Eastern romantic mate online and even claimed her medication-induced rash was really a “hickey” created through her intense, albeit online, relationship. A more tempered example is Ron, a good-hearted gay single who felt overly disillusioned and depressed in seeing all the overly sculpted stats of gay singles on Craigslist -- until he finally stumbled upon the Craiglist Dictionary that revealed the ubiquitous exaggeration of stats.

In conclusion, Richard Dawkins' picture of God is an anti-social narcissist, and it seems that the Internet breeds this kind of dangerous meme in many of its users.

## Ch 4: Ordinary Everyday Viciousness

This chapter asserts that the Internet is a playground for the Freudian "id" with all its dark impulses. Instead of asking "What did you dream last night?" the psychoanalyst ought to ask "Where did you go online last night when your wife was asleep?" In Freudian terms, we lack an authority figure that can act as the virtue-reigning superego, though a cyber-security czar may be a step in the right direction. Like the days of Lewis and Clark, exploration and progress in the technological sphere has developed in a kind of moral vacuum with legal checks far too slow to catch up. Aboujaoude opens the chapter with examples of paranoia in spouses, such as Raffi a depressed, laid-off, overweight husband he thinks his wife is cheating on simply because he can't see himself as loveable, ultimately leading to great guilt after spying on her only to find her utmost fidelity and care. Other examples include the prevalence of Internet-facilitated cheating in schools, online gambling that is hard to localize and monitor much (like cheating), and the rise of hate groups like the KKK, neo-Nazis, skinheads, various militias, Al Qaeda, and jihadists.

The Internet and technology gives greater free reign to aggression because because of anonymity and the capacity for "distance" in online interpersonal communication. Online message boards that quickly devolve into insults and judging attacks are case in point. Similarly, the worst of group dynamics can manifest in Second Life, as one well-known and articulate Second-lifer observes. Flickr also provides an example of the challenge of keeping in check ill-spirited dynamics in a large online community. New abilities for viciousness though are exemplified by cyber-bullying and the MySpace Suicide Hoax: Lori Drew, a mother of a child teased by Megan Meier ultimately took her anger to the extreme by posing as a Myspace schoolboy who lured Megan in with enticing, interested dialogue only to vitriolically attack her, which ultimately led to her suicide. Cyberbullying proves problematic because it becomes easier to inflict pain when one does not see one face to face. Additionally, victims are not just preyed on during school hours, but can constantly exist in fear with their phone always on, and even more, they may not always know the attacker, leading them to potentially fear the worst.

Technology and the Internet may also make us more aggressive and desensitized to violence. A longitudinal and cross-cultural study in both the US and Japan causally linked playing violent video games in youthful years to increases in aggressive behavior. These games often provide immersive, graphic environments free of the most basic moral considerations (think Grand Theft Auto and killing prostitutes) which may instill a lack of empathy and compassion. Yet not only may we be desensitized to violence, we even start viewing violence as entertainment or sexy.

Viral Internet videos, such as a woman in China petting a dog only to then stomp it to death with her heels, become lunch-break videos forwarded as entertainment to others. The Craigslist Killer also provides an example where the Internet not only made this killing spree possible, but also provided a kind of “psychological out,” whereby Internet bloggers kept commenting on the good looks of the tall, handsome med-student-turned killer (the killer may feel less remorse when people write “He’s sick, but he’s totally hot”).

Group support for viciousness is especially problematic. Suicide chat rooms and “suicide pacts” may target those as young as twelve. As a flip-side to last chapter’s “godlike thinking”, vicious group support may lead individuals thinking they are terrible and deserve to die; such was the case with young man, who video-blogged his overdosing to a bodybuilding chat room that egged him on, commenting and encouraging him. In this terribly bleak chapter, Aboujaoude cautions to not forget the capability for goodness, and that every vicious instance there’s a virtuous one: the “balker” who gives a lifeline to a suicidal person, online charitable giving, and Internet-scam busters. Psychoanalysis is all about bringing darkness (the unconscious) to light (the conscious), so we should strive to do the same as a society.

## Ch 7: Love and Sex Recalibrated

This chapter focuses on two themes: (1) the threat to love once possible through dating and commitment, but now threatened by online dating and virtual life, (2) unsafe practices and lust that drives much sexually-related Internet behavior. Online dating in terms Match.com, eHarmony, or PlentyofFish.com give the sense that there are always plenty of options, and if you’re not satisfied, rather than making things work, you can just move on to the next fish in the sea. For some individuals, Second Life or Sims avatars lead people to grow less interested in their real life partners and more with the partners they can at times handcraft and tailor to their vision of perfection. Aboujaoude brings up the extreme examples of a man who was divorced by his wife after he found her repeatedly “cheating on him” with virtual rendezvous on second life, and a man who left his real life girlfriend because he became enthralled by Nadia, another person’s avatar that he handcrafted her features.

The virtual representations of beauty and the ideals of bodytype are not new, but online life seems to overexpose us to these, or is at least a contributor. The risk here is that what used to be “good enough” no longer is; online images of ideals influence offline satisfaction with say our girlfriend or boyfriend, and we may feel like we’re “settling” if you don’t find the ideal person. The desire and pressure to be “hot” may be worsened by say, pro-anorexia or pro-bulimia groups offering “thinspiration” online.

A tendency toward more unsafe sex also seems to come with the online territory. Studies in gay youth, adult men, and adult women found that those courting and meeting mates online

practiced more unsafe sex than those primarily involved with face to face dating. In women, it seems that because they have exchanged emails with the man, researched him online, they have the gut feeling that this is a safe guy; by the time they go on a first date, there is little left to find out, and they can pretty much jump to sex.

8. The Illusion of Knowledge

9. Internet Addiction

10. The End of Privacy

11. Marking Time, Making Memories

12. Virtualism, or the Art of Being More Real than Real