

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Anxiety, alienation, and estrangement in the context of social media

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Abstract

This article applies Paul Tillich's existentialist analysis of the human predicament, particularly what it means to exist and to be fallen, to social media. I argue that social media heightens feelings of alienation and estrangement, supporting this claim with evidence from empirical research in psychiatry and communication studies. Thus, I offer an application of a Tillichian approach to an area of culture previously unexamined in this way. I identify three primary ways in which social media exacerbates existentialist emotional states: (1) social media allows us to construct artificial versions of ourselves through the use of filters and photo editing software; (2) it provides the means to quantify social approval in groups the size of which the human brain has not evolved for; (3) it extends the size of our social networks but decreases the quality of interactions. Social media is yet to receive significant philosophical or theological engagement despite its prevalence, particularly within younger generations. I argue that this is a mistake – philosophy has a duty to engage with such a ubiquitous feature of modern life.

Keywords: Paul Tillich; Social Media; Estrangement; Alienation; Existentialism

Introduction

Existentialist analyses of the human predicament generally centre on our experience of existence. Focusing on (typically) negative emotions that arise from some level of unease with ourselves or our place in the world, existentialists often claim that we experience anxiety about fitting in, about realizing our true potential, and about how connected we are to those things that give us meaning and purpose. In this article, I argue that the existentialist theology of Paul Tillich gets something deeply right about the human situation. Moreover, I argue that social media heightens the negative emotional states identified by Tillich's existential analysis by providing a platform upon which alienation and estrangement are commonplace. In short, social media acts like a magnifying glass to the extent that it focuses and fortifies aspects of human social existence that lead to feelings of alienation and estrangement. I use the term 'social media' in line with Carr and Hayes' 2015 definition: 'social media are Internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others' (Carr & Hayes (2015), 47). Two salient features

of this definition are examined in detail in this article: selective self-presentation and interaction with broad and narrow audiences.

Tillich understands the anxiety brought by feelings of alienation and estrangement as characteristic of ‘fallenness’ in that they are fundamentally intertwined with finite existence. Introduced by Hegel, estrangement refers to a split between that which has the potential to be united. In Tillichian thought, humanity is estranged from ‘the ground of [our] being, from other beings, and from [ourselves]’ (Tillich (1957), 51). We are separated from God with whom we desire to be united, we are estranged from other individuals with whom we share a social existence, and we are estranged from the truest realization of our own potential. Furthermore, human existence is defined by feelings of alienation, defined as a feeling of unease with existence due to the unhomeliness of the world. We feel thrown into an existence that we did not choose, and therefore we never truly feel at home. Alienation also manifests in the inability to forge deep and meaningful social connections under the conditions of existence, and our fundamental separation from the ground of being (namely, God).¹ The consequence is a deep anxiety.

I argue that we see evidence of alienation and estrangement through the anxiety caused therein. Anxiety disorders are rapidly increasing in young people, a trend that has been attributed to social media usage (Keles et al. (2019)). This can be understood through the lens of Tillich’s existentialist analysis of the human situation. Essentially, Tillich’s analysis of the real world has important corollaries in the world of social media. Social media is yet to receive significant philosophical or theological engagement, despite its prevalence in the lives of many, particularly the younger generations. I suggest that this is an error – something so ubiquitous demands philosophical attention. Tillich offers insight here. In the following discussion, I provide an application of Tillich’s method and substantive claims to the as yet philosophically unexamined phenomenon of social media, arguing that Tillich reveals the ways social media can be existentially threatening.

Tillich’s existentialist assessment

Existence

For Tillich, fallenness and existence cannot be separated – fallenness is woven throughout the very fabric of existent reality. Finite existence creates the conditions of fallenness through alienation, actualization of potential, and the anxiety caused therein. Tillich’s assessment of fallenness is grounded upon several key binaries: potentiality/actuality; essence/existence; alienation/reconciliation. Both reality and human experience of reality are split in accordance with these binary pairs; they have, therefore, ontological and psychological dimensions. Running through the entire discussion is the belief that human individuals are estranged from their essence, and the awareness of this fact causes deep anxiety. As will emerge later, I argue that these feelings of estrangement are intensified by certain features of social media.

Tillich defines essence as potentiality; standing out of essence involves existential distortion. *Existence and the Christ* begins with a discussion of the etymology of the terms ‘existence’ and ‘existential’. As these terms have a multiplicity of meanings, clarification of their definition is necessary at the outset. Tillich unpacks the concept of existence by returning to its Latin root *existere*, namely, to stand out. This idea of ‘standing out’ is at the heart of Tillich’s existentialist concern – existence is to stand out of non-being/nothingness. If something exists then it stands out of non-being in such a way that is discoverable, directly or indirectly, in the finite physical realm. Entities participate in being at least to some extent – a pre-existent entity participates in the power of being before that power has been actualized. Therefore, it participates in *potentiality*. In standing out of its own

non-being, namely coming into existence, the individual moves from potentiality to actuality.

By the very nature of finitude, however, one cannot totally stand out of non-being. Human beings experience the liminality that comes from standing out of mere potentiality while also remaining in it to a certain extent. A being 'never pours out its power of being completely into its state of existence. It never fully exhausts its potentialities' (Tillich (1957), 21). Through the transition from essence to existence, leaving behind potentiality for the finite actuality of existence, something fundamental is lost. The individual becomes estranged from the ground of being and from the fullest realization of their potential, while standing in being enough to be aware of the possibility of reconciliation; thus, pervasive feelings of alienation are introduced.

Existence involves the collapse of an individual's infinite potential into a single, actualized self. Tillich argues that 'existence is estrangement and not reconciliation; it is dehumanization and not the expression of essential humanity ... the existence of the individual is filled with anxiety and meaninglessness' (Tillich (1957), 28). In *Systematic Theology*, this does not mean the absence of meaning, as Ann Ulanov points out: 'the problem is not a lack of meanings, but too many of them. We see multiple meanings, ambivalent meanings, even opposite meanings, especially when we look at large historical currents, political issues, or problems of global dimension. It is the abundance of meanings that so confounds us' (Ulanov (1985), 130). Through this quagmire no single or significant meaning emerges, and the multiplicity of meanings feels threatening.

Moreover, embodied existence causes us to experience estrangement from our essential selves, as concrete existence consists of limitation and a narrowing of one's possibilities. We participate in essence only partially, through vague semi-conscious remembrance, and this awareness has the pervasive psychological consequences hitherto discussed. Closely related is the second binary Tillich identifies as permeating the finite realm: potentiality and actuality. Essence is pure potentiality, and existence is finite actuality. Ontologically, to fall out of potentiality into actuality is to 'fall away from what man essentially is' (Tillich (1957), 24). Being created in the image of God allows us to participate in the unlimited potential of divine essence. To transition from essence into existence, then, is to be thrown into existence and estranged from the ground of our being. This manifests in both the quotidian and the spiritual.

Quotidian existence consists of limiting oneself to a specific path, whether that is a career, a vocation, or another lifestyle choice. We are fundamentally limited by the finiteness of our being and can never exhaust all the possibilities of a human life; there is neither the time nor the freedom to do so. Continuously stymied by a manifold of both external and internal phenomena that inhibit us from fulfilling our potential, we desire unobtainable fulfilment. Tillich argues that this creates a deep fear of meaninglessness, and the threat of death and non-being sharpens this into anxiety. As Heywood Thomas notes, 'man is aware of his non-being and this "inward" expression of his "outward" finitude is the anxiety which is the fundamental character of his life' (Heywood Thomas (2000), 88). The external features of the finite world shape individuals' internal psychology in characteristically existentialist ways.²

Fallenness

Understanding how finite reality is fallen is fundamentally linked to how it was created, and the characteristics and limitations imposed on it from the beginning. Tillich understands anything finite as inherently imbued with non-being, despite standing out of non-being into existence. By this he means that reality is actual but contingent – destruction and death are real threats. Existence is fragile.

The transition from essence to existence is encapsulated by the Fall. In keeping with the rest of *Systematic Theology*, the Fall narrative is understood as both a myth and a religious symbol. Tillich argues that the Fall narrative in Genesis 1–3 symbolically represents the transition from essential to existential being. Tillich sees ‘humanity before the Fall’, not as a reality, but as an ontological potentiality, with the Edenic human form being the fullest realization of the potential lying latent in each individual.³ Rather than a historically accurate text depicting actual events of the past, Genesis denotes ‘the trans-historical quality of all events in time and space’ (Tillich (1957), 46). The idealized state of prelapsarian Adam exists as potentiality in all of humanity, but it is obscured by the ontological fragmentation undergone in the transition from essence to existence. It symbolizes the crystalizing of the myriad potentialities into actual, finite existence. Thus, the task of theologians is not to analyse the degradation from an actual perfect past to a current fallen state, but rather to discern the inherent potentiality in creation through existential distortion (Heywood Thomas (2000), 91).

The consequences are estrangement from both the ground of being that theologians call God, and one’s own essence. Finite fallen creatures do not experience the fullest expression of being of which they are capable, nor do they participate in the being of God. The psychological consequences are manifold, but centre on the existentialist themes that undulate in and out of focus throughout *Systematic Theology*. Individuals are acutely aware of the possibility of losing themselves, failing to actualize their full potential, or remaining estranged from their ground of being and of themselves. This awareness brings guilt and anxiety.⁴

Consequences for the human subject

The first dimension of fallenness and social media to be explored is that of the *individual*. Although Tillich deals primarily in ontological discourse, the categories he identifies have real and tangible psychological consequences which are directly relevant to lived human experience. As Elizabeth Earle writes, ‘while some philosophers take a metaphysical Archimedean standpoint, or a God’s eye view, Tillich does not. Rather, his philosophy is rooted in human existence’ (Earle (2017)). This is echoed by Daniel Sullivan, Mark Landeau, and Aaron Kay who examine Tillich through the lens of ‘Experimental Existential Psychology’ (XXP). XXP’s primary research aim is to examine how contemplation of so-called ‘big questions’ shapes how individuals think and act. Sullivan et al. argue that Tillich’s model of ‘core’ existential threat (the threat of non-being, namely death) and other ‘peripheral’ threats provides a useful framework for advancing XXP. This is due to Tillich’s focus on lived experience, and what it means to exist as a being who contemplates the nature of being.

In this article, using terminology from Sullivan et al., I argue that Tillich provides a valuable and useful articulation of *peripheral*, but nonetheless highly significant, threats. Specifically, I explore the threat of social media. It is a peripheral threat in that it poses no existential threat to life; it is at most tangentially relevant to the threat of non-being.⁵ It does, however, have existentialist corollaries which are yet to be philosophically addressed. Though social media need not be seen as inherently negative, indeed one can easily identify several benefits, it can pose a real threat to the mental health of individuals who use it frequently. This threat is best explored through the existentialist model provided by Paul Tillich.

Sullivan et al. identify four dimensions to Tillich’s understanding of existential threat: *anxiety*, *awareness*, *nonbeing*, and *existential*. For Tillich, ‘finitude in awareness is anxiety’ (Tillich (1953), 212). Such anxiety is best understood in contrast to fear. The latter is directed towards a specific object and can be alleviated. My fear of spiders can cause me to feel

terror on seeing a spider run past my desk, but that feeling can be alleviated if someone comes and removes the spider for me. Anxiety, on the other hand, is not properly directed. It is an altogether more ethereal mood which colours our experience of the world (Tillich (1953), 212). Not quite feeling at home in the world makes us contemplate the possibility of the world without us, and, subsequently the inevitability of that coming to pass with death. Thus anxiety, particularly as brought about by awareness of finitude and death, is an integral part of the existential condition which cannot be alleviated.

Awareness implies self-consciousness on the part of the individual. Humanity is distinguished by its ability for heightened self-reflection. As Tillich writes: ‘every being participates in the structure of being, but man alone is immediately aware of this structure’ (Tillich (1953), 186). Our cognitive capacities and desire to contemplate ‘big questions’ leads to anxiety. This anxiety can be directed towards a fear of meaninglessness (a peripheral threat) or the (core) threat of non-being. *Non-being*, viz. non-existence, mortality, death, shapes our experience of everything else. We are constantly aware of existential threats, however remote, and this causes a background anxiety which the existentialist argues fundamentally colours all human experience. This brings us to the final dimension of Tillich’s understanding of existential threat – the *existential* aspect. Sullivan et al. argue that this has two primary implications: it suggests that the existential threat is a normal part of human experience (therefore, it is not pathological), and it refers to the threat of one’s own non-being specifically (Sullivan et al. (2012), 738). With these dimensions of existential threat in mind, we now turn to some of the so-called peripheral threats enhanced by social media. I identify three ways social media heightens feelings of alienation and estrangement:

- (1) Social media allows us to construct artificial, idealized selves through posting ‘highlights’ and using filters and photo editing software to distort images of the face and body.
- (2) Social media provides the means to quantify social approval.
- (3) Though social media extends the size of our social networks it often decreases the quality of interactions.

(1) relates to the individual and their self-conception; (2) and (3) stem from the social aspect of these platforms.

Constructing the ideal self

Social media platforms allow individuals to construct idealized versions of themselves. Individuals then see this idealized self as, in Tillichian terms, unactualized potential which they are unable to realize. This creates yet another environment in which the individual is aware of latent potential that they are unable to manifest in their lives, resulting in another source of anxiety. The idealized self is created in the following ways. Only the ‘best’ pictures get posted, which creates a highlights reel showing only positive experience. Moreover, and perhaps more damaging for mental health, is an increasing prevalence of photo editing software and the use of filters which distort an individual’s appearance. These create a social experience and physical appearance which functions as a representation of unrealized, often *unrealizable*, potential.

Tillich’s existentialist analysis of the human predicament can be adapted to provide insights in this context. He argues that fallenness is estrangement from one’s essence and the failure to fulfil one’s true potential. Essence and existence, the first binary pair introduced in *Existence and the Christ*, maps the transition into existence that each finite object undergoes. The transition from essence to existence is, Tillich claims, the original fact – it

underlies all other facts and is a universal quality of finite being (Tillich (1957), 37). Hence, as Donald Dreisbach writes,

My essence is a cluster of possibilities, possibilities that belong to me because I am a man and because I am the particular man that I am. These possibilities are real, and therefore have some ontological status, which Tillich calls potential being, a limited, unactualized level of being. The act of existing, of taking on actual being, is the actualization of potentialities. But in this process of actualization potentialities are rejected, and those that are actualized are not perfectly realized. Hence existence, although ontologically a higher state of being, is a distortion of and a falling away from essential possibilities. So to be, and especially to be a human being, is to be in a continual tension between essence and existence, between what is and what could be. (Dreisbach (1980), 531)

This tension is the root of Tillich's existential analysis of the human predicament. Existence entails a narrowing of possibilities, a collapsing of potential into a single actualized personhood. Under the conditions of existence, essence and existence are split. Tillich's understanding of this split has its roots in Plato's theory of the forms. In existing, an individual object participates in the essence that gives it its nature, while remaining fundamentally distinct from it. The essential and existential dimensions are ontologically separate, and, following Plato, Tillich understands the existent world as the deceptive, less real world. True being, therefore, is essential being (Tillich (1957), 23).

Dreisbach notes the Platonic influences on this conception of finite existence, particularly the theory of the forms, arguing that Tillich's formulation of essence has three primary strands (Dreisbach (1980), 523–536). The first is empirical, namely that an object's essence is gathered from empirical knowledge about the general behaviour of objects that belong to certain kinds. Observation of hens shows that they produce eggs, hence one's empirical knowledge of the essence of a hen is that it is a being that produces eggs. The second strand is evaluating – a hen is evaluated against the standards one expects, hence a hen unable to produce eggs fails to live up to the expectations generated by an understanding of its essence. It is evaluated poorly against these standards. This evaluation requires the third strand of essence: potentiality. The fullest realization of a hen's potentiality involves the production of eggs, and a failure to produce eggs is a failure to actualize this potentiality. For human beings, the fullest realization of essence is out of reach in the finite realm of existence. We are unable to live up to these expectations and manifest the potentiality inherent within us, hence we experience estrangement and anxiety.

This tripartite understanding of essence has applicability to social media. Regarding the empirical, social media platforms contain a wealth of data about other individuals against which we can compare ourselves. The number of users is growing exponentially, and this provides an extremely high amount of empirical data which can inform our expectations of what our life, achievements, and physical appearance, should be like. This leads to the evaluative dimension. With every criterion against which we can be evaluated, there will be another social media user who out-performs us. This is a consequence of the sheer number of users on these platforms, however, it can have a seriously damaging effect on self-worth if by every metric we come up short. The final aspect of essence Dreisbach identifies in Tillich's understanding of essence is potentiality. Social media presents a plethora of potentialities, in terms of both what is possible for humans in general and what is possible for a specific individual to achieve, engage with, or look like. By comparing ourselves to these unrealizable potentialities, we are likely to experience intense feelings of estrangement.

This can be developed by pushing the parallels between Tillich and Plato a little further. Plato's *Republic* presents an ontological stratification of reality into levels, each of which is further removed from truth than the last. This is expressed through Socrates' analogy of the divided line, presented in the *Republic*, which is split into four unequal sections: 'thus there are four such conditions in the soul, corresponding to the four subsections of the line: understanding for the highest, thought for the second, belief for the third, and imaging for the last. Arrange them in a ratio, and consider that each shares in clarity to the degree that the subsection is set over shares in truth' (Plato, 511d; trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev. C. D. Reeve, in Cooper (1997)). The last section of the line, *eikasias*, concerns imagination, appearances, and is represented by images and reflections. It is the furthest removed from truth – ontologically estranged from higher forms of being and epistemically impoverished due to its distorting of truth through degrees of separation.

This maps onto the idealized, virtual, edited self. Not only is the created image epistemically removed from truth, insofar as it fails to faithfully reflect the appearance of the individual, but as it is an image it is an ontologically impoverished reflection. Striving after such a representation is likely to leave a subject unsatisfied. The individual is faced with a version of themselves that is distorted, and desires reconciliation with the self who is reflected back at them. This is unobtainable, as the reflected, virtual self is an artefact of editing software, not a living, breathing, complex person. Moreover, and more insidiously, the idealized self is *not* an artistic representation, rather it is intended to be an accurate (though enhanced) depiction of the self. Whereas one would not readily and realistically compare oneself to a portrait or poem, the idealized selves on social media are held as realistic standards to strive for. One can create a version of themselves that looks real, in a way that a portrait or poem does not, and though this reflection is sterile and two-dimensional, it can create an unrealistic standard of comparison with which one cannot be reconciled. It is precisely because these images are so realistic that they are so threatening. Thus, social media has the potential to provide a platform upon which the individual is yet further estranged – not only from the potentiality inherent in being, but from a visual representation of themselves.

Tillich shares Plato's misgivings about the existent world insofar as it is capable of being the fulfilment, morally and spiritually, of what is ontologically possible. Existent objects participate in essences while simultaneously being estranged from realization of their true potential. As Thatcher writes, 'essences realise themselves in the appearance of actual entities, and our conceptual grasp of actuality is not completed unless our minds first posit essences and see their embodiments in actual existence' (Thatcher (1978), 101). Through this process of actualization, the entity loses some aspect of what it essentially is, becoming distorted by the conditions of existence.

By existing in the finite physical realm, objects stand out of non-being to participate in being without fully separating themselves from non-being; they become existent and estranged from their essence while participating in it to the extent that its essence gives it its nature. Such ambiguity is characteristic of *Systematic Theology*. Consequently, the transition from essence to existence is a loss of true essentiality. In this sense, to exist 'is to fall away from what man essentially is' (Tillich (1957), 22). The existence of an idealized self can be understood as another dimension of manifest fallenness thus defined, insofar as the individual is unable to live up to the image of themselves that they have created. The idealized self is a further step away from essential being.

Research into the consequences of social media supports the existentialist analysis I put forth here. One would expect that increased alienation and estrangement as a result of social media use would generate an increase in anxiety and general dissatisfaction with the self. Research into this supports what the existentialist analysis predicts. In a recent study, Janella Eshiet examines the effect filters on the app Snapchat have on young

women's body image and beauty perceptions. A Snapchat filter will subtly alter the individual's appearance, from seemingly innocuous skin smoothing, to outright distortion through plumping the lips and changing the eye colour. This is leading to a trend termed 'Snapchat dysphoria' or 'Snapchat dysmorphia' in which an increasing number of young people, particularly women, are seeking out cosmetic surgery to align their physical appearance with the appearance they achieve through Snapchat filters (Eshiet (2020)).⁶ This is evidence that an increasing number of people are seeking reconciliation with their idealized self through surgical alteration of their physical appearance.

Kamleshun Ramphul and Stephanie G. Mejias (2018) explore similar issues from a medical perspective, calling Snapchat Dysmorphia a 'big issue'. Moreover, in a systematic survey of the relationship between body satisfaction and Social Networking Sites (SNS), Grace Holland and Marika Tiggemann (2016) found that 'use of SNSs is associated with body image and disordered eating. Specific SNS activities, such as viewing and uploading photos and seeking negative feedback via status updates, were identified as particularly problematic.' It seems, then, that creating an idealized version of oneself that one is then unable to live up to produces specific anxieties, consistent with what an existentialist analysis would predict.

Quantifying social approval and decreasing the quality of interactions

Another feature of social media which has the potential to exacerbate feelings of alienation and estrangement is its *social* dimension. The two social aspects relevant to the present discussion, namely quantifying social approval and decreasing the quality of interactions, are deeply interwoven, and so will be considered together.

Through features such as the 'like' button, and displaying the number of followers or friends each user has, one can quantify one's social approval in ways impossible before the internet. Moreover, this approval and disapproval can extend over much larger groups than humans ever evolved to participate in. Yuval Noah Harari (2014) suggests that humans have evolved to exist in networks of approximately 150, showing that social media provides greater reach than would have previously been possible. Yet with that comes the increasing opportunity for quantifying social approval and experiencing social exclusion. Moreover, the increased network size does not always enhance the social experience, in fact it can facilitate social unfulfillment due to the (often) transitory and impoverished nature of online interactions.

Tillich identifies two features of existence which are relevant here, namely loneliness and solitude. He writes, 'one of the causes of meaningless suffering – indeed, the main cause, is the "aleness" of the individual being, his desire to overcome it by union with other beings, and the hostility which results from the rejection of this desire' (Tillich (1957), 71). In *The Eternal Now* (1963), Tillich explores these thoughts in depth. He defines loneliness as the pain of being alone; it is the ache we feel for community and companionship that manifests in the absence of meaningful encounters with others. Solitude, on the other hand, is the glory of being alone. One might experience the pleasure of solitude when reading poetry or in the silent presence of nature. As Tillich writes, 'we can speak without voice to the trees and the clouds and the waves of the sea. Without words they respond through the rustling of leaves and the moving of clouds and the murmuring of the sea' (Tillich (1963), ch. 1, part III). One can overcome loneliness, Tillich argues, if one can bear solitude.

Embracing solitude, however, is no easy task for inherently social human beings, yet Tillich maintains that the conditions of existence cut humanity off from true and authentic encounter with the other. This intense loneliness drives the individual to seek the collective in order to alleviate loneliness. In continuously seeking out communion, one never

develops the ability to be self-sufficient and comfortable in solitude. Tillich argues that this creates a negative feedback loop which only increases feelings of alienation, estrangement, and anxiety:

The individual continues to seek for the other one and is rejected, in part or in full; for the other one is also a lonely individual, unable to have communion because he is unable to have solitude. Such rejection is the source of much hostility not only against those who reject one but also against oneself. In this way the essential structure of solitude and communion is distorted by existential estrangement into a source of infinite suffering. (Tillich (1957), 72)

On Tillich's view, painful feelings of loneliness are both inevitable and ubiquitous. Humanity is unique in that we are both alone and *aware* that we are alone. We are able to look to each other, long for each other, and yet we are doomed to feel alienated from each other. The desire for true communion with one another cannot be fulfilled under the conditions of existence in which we are fundamentally alienated from each other, from ourselves, and from God.

This draws out one of social media's greatest temptations. The individual has means for almost infinite social interaction through their devices, which are more often than not carried on their person. Within these easily accessible platforms are millions of other users, most of whom are also seeking communion, and most of whom can be directly engaged with. It is easier to pick up one's phone and scroll through a social media app than it is to engage in the sometimes challenging work of embracing solitude. Learning to find genuine joy in one's own company is not always easy for social beings such as ourselves, and therefore one may easily succumb to the temptation to seek communion online. Yet the very antidote to loneliness that we seek actually erodes our ability to exist in solitude and so leads to increased feelings of anxiety and loneliness. This is the paradox of social media: the temptation to seek out communion and escape solitude drives social media usage, but the type of impoverished connection provided through these platforms is unable to fulfil the desire that drove the user to log on in the first place.

Tillich noted this type of problem even in the pre-internet age:

Today, more intensely than in preceding periods, man is so lonely that he cannot bear solitude. And he tries desperately to become a part of the crowd. Everything in our world supports him. It is a symptom of our disease that teachers and parents and the managers of public communication do everything possible to deprive us of the external conditions for solitude, the simplest aids to privacy ... An unceasing pressure attempts to destroy even our desire for solitude. (Tillich (1963), ch. 1, part III)

In the twenty-first century, our social approval can be quantified in ways unimaginable before the ubiquity of social media. There is pressure to upload images of us being social, active, and desirable members of society, and these images are then opened up for public scrutiny via 'likes', 'shares', 'comments', etc. In turn, we view this same content uploaded by our peers and are constantly faced with the possibility that we are not as popular or socially connected as those on our feeds. This has the potential to increase feelings of alienation and estrangement, as well as to drive the user to engage even more with social media in the erroneous hope that this may solve the problem. As Tillich writes above, everything in our world now supports the alleged alleviation of loneliness at the expense of the glory of solitude, and, often, at the expense of the quality of the social interactions

themselves. As Tillich astutely remarks, of this situation we may say ‘I never felt so lonely as in that particular hour when I was surrounded by people but suddenly realized my ultimate isolation’ (Tillich (1963), ch. 1, part III).

In addition to this general problem with social existence that is exacerbated on social media, the specific format of these platforms can also inhibit meaningful encounter. For example, some platforms limit the word count of individual units of expression (‘snaps’ on Snapchat and ‘tweets’ on Twitter each have word limits). This has the potential to truncate self-expression, places limitations on the richness of online interactions, and severely stymies the possibility of nuance.

On those platforms that do not limit message lengths, the dynamic interaction characteristic of lively conversation is often lost due to the written form – body language, intonation, and facial expressions are absent in written social media posts. Even when individuals do communicate through videos posted to followers on YouTube, TikTok, and Instagram (thus preserving body language, intonation, and facial expressions) these are unidirectional encounters. The typical conversational form in which interlocutors engage in a back-and-forth is either prohibited or at least significantly truncated (i.e. when users make videos responding to another user’s content). Tillich’s existentialist analysis can also be applied here – in seeking out social interaction on social media platforms, one is met with a far more impoverished form of communication than would be permitted by a dynamic face-to-face encounter. Following Tillich, one could predict that this would create feelings of estrangement and alienation from one’s social network, even if that network is far greater in number than was accessible to pre-internet human groups.

This is substantiated by a recent study in which Hunt et al. examined the relationship between social media usage and loneliness and depression. They found a significant decrease in feelings of loneliness and depression in a group of randomly selected undergraduates from the University of Pennsylvania who were asked to limit their social media usage to ten minutes a day. This indicates a positive relationship between loneliness, depression, and social media (Hunt et al. (2018)). Other similarly directed research comes to similar conclusions (Kelley et al. (2018)). Interestingly, though, Chia-Chen Yang (2016, 703) found that ‘Instagram interaction and Instagram browsing were both related to lower loneliness, whereas Instagram broadcasting was associated with higher loneliness.’ This indicates that Tillich’s existentialist assessment of estrangement and suffering which stem from unfulfilling social interactions receives ambiguous support from empirical research at the present time. Though other studies support Tillich’s predictions, more work is required in this area before the decreased quality of social interactions can be categorically shown to cause feelings of estrangement.

‘Falleness’ as estrangement and alienation in the context of social media

I have argued that Paul Tillich’s existentialist analysis of ‘falleness’ as alienation and estrangement has relevance for social media as well as for the so-called ‘real world’. Social media platforms focus and fortify elements of existence which create existentialist feelings of anxiety, through allowing the creation of an idealized version of the self, through the ability to quantify social approval, and through failing (often) to facilitate rich social interaction. The existentialist analysis of the self as alienated from their social surroundings and estranged from the fullest realization of its own potential is heightened on social media, and Tillich’s existential analysis would predict that with these increased feelings of alienation and estrangement comes anxiety. Such anxiety might manifest as anxiety disorders, disordered self-image, or depression. This is substantiated by empirical research into this area, lending further support to the relevance of an existentialist analysis of social media usage (Vannucci et al. (2017)).

There is much more work to be done assessing the philosophical and theological implications of social media. It is a significant feature of many people's lives, and it appears to be here to stay. Philosophers should not shy away from this responsibility. In an increasingly post-truth era, philosophical engagement with platforms that allow the distortion of reality, by individuals, groups, and even governments, is more important than ever. Steps forward have been made here, but there are many more to be taken.⁷

Notes

1. For more on the rich history of this concept, see Leopold (2018).
2. Tillich does present a robust account of how the individual can overcome these feelings of anxiety, namely *courage*. In *The Courage to Be* he defines courage as self-affirmation 'in-spite-of', namely in spite of the threats of non-being, alienation, and estrangement. By taking anxiety into oneself, accepting it as inevitable but conquerable, the individual is able to courageously bear the weight of existence. Moreover, through this courage one participates in the ground of being. This could also be used as framework for overcoming the existentialist emotional states caused by social media that are identified in this article (Tillich (1952)).
3. An obvious problem here is theodicy: how could anxiety, estrangement and sin enter the world if no literal Fall event occurred? That humanity would be tempted at all presupposes estrangement. The answer lies in the correct interpretation of concupiscence. For further discussion, see Tillich (1957), 128–131.
4. For further discussion, see Ulanov (1985).
5. Some have argued, however, that the threat of new media is *not* peripheral and that we are going through a major transition of the forms of common existence. Thus, information and communication technologies, of which social media forms a part, could pose core threats to human existence. For such arguments, see Floridi (2014).
6. Though Eshiet's sample was small and from a single area, leading to limitations in generalisability, she succeeds in identifying that this trend exists in at least the young women surveyed. I argue that these findings are not isolated, though further research is needed.
7. For example: Hannan (2018).

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