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# Huckleberry Finn takes the Turing test: The transformation of ontologies and the virtuality of kinds



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## ABSTRACT

This essay is about the relation between social statuses, mental states, and material substances; the indexical signs used to infer such underlying kinds; the conditions for and consequences of the ontologies that license such inferences; and the potentially reflexive and transformative relations individuals bearing such identities have towards each other and themselves. While it begins with what may be called ‘the Huckleberry Finn Test’ (inferring gender in face-to-face interaction), it concludes with the Turing Test (deciding between human and computer in teletype-mediated communication). It argues that most thought about the Turing test has focused on a very limited type of inference. And it shows four other important ways our indexical encounters with others can both transform, and be transformed by, our ontologies.

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*And don't go about women in that old calico. You do a girl tolerable poor, but you might fool men, maybe. Bless you, child, when you set out to thread a needle don't hold the thread still and fetch the needle up to it; hold the needle still and poke the thread at it; that's the way a woman most always does, but a man always does t'other way. And when you throw at a rat or anything, hitch yourself up a tiptoe and fetch your hand up over your head as awkward as you can, and miss your rat about six or seven foot. Throw stiff-armed from the shoulder, like there was a pivot there for it to turn on, like a girl; not from the wrist and elbow, with your arm out to one side, like a boy. And, mind you, when a girl tries to catch anything in her lap she throws her knees apart; she don't clap them together, the way you did when you caught the lump of lead. Why, I spotted you for a boy when you was threading the needle; and I contrived the other things just to make certain.*

—Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, Chapter 11, by Mark Twain (2006 [1884])

## 1. All kinds are virtual

Dressed as a girl, Huckleberry Finn went into town to find out what people were saying about Jim. In this scene, Mrs. Judith Loftus has just ‘spotted him for a boy’, and she is reporting to him the evidence she used to come to this conclusion. In particular, she has a set of assumptions regarding the types of behaviors that boys and girls are more or less likely to do in various circumstances. For example, girls not only wear dresses and bonnets when they are in public, but they also open their knees when trying to catch something in their lap, and hold their arm stiffly when throwing. More specifically, Mrs. Loftus has a relatively elaborate (and, in part, articulatable) set of assumptions about which indices are evinced by individuals belonging to what kinds with what likelihoods (e.g. ‘most always’). And she uses these assumptions not only to infer that Huck is a boy rather than a girl, but also to generate a set of experiments (or ‘trials’) to check her own hypothesis.

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Some of these indices are relatively easy to think of and simple to feign (e.g. wearing a bonnet). Others are relatively tacit and embodied, and so hard to predict or hide (e.g. threading a needle). And all are strongly correlated with one social kind rather than another (if only in the mind of Mrs. Loftus), and involve circumstances and behaviors that are more or less public and easy to elicit.

Such a set of assumptions might be called a theory (when articulated in relation to a scientific institution), a stereotype (when negatively valenced), a likelihood (when framed mathematically), a heuristic (when framed qualitatively, or as a 'rule of thumb'), an imaginary (when understood in relation to an underlying account or narrative about the prototypic entities involved in the domain being judged), a culture (when more or less intersubjectively shared by a group of people), and even a habitus or 'sense' (when understood as a tacit intuition regarding another's identity via their techniques of the body, styles of speaking, and so forth). In what follows, the term *ontology* will be used as a cover-all term to capture the ramifications present in each of these framings (Kockelman, 2013). Indeed, just as Huck had an ontology regarding which indices boys and girls were likely to express (even if he was out-ontologized by his host), and just as Mrs. Loftus had an ontology regarding which indices would be hard to mask, so Mark Twain had an ontology regarding which ontologies individuals with identities like Huck and Mrs. Loftus would be likely to hold.

This essay is about the relation between such signs and the kinds they index; the conditions for and consequences of the ontologies (theories, likelihoods, imaginaries, etc.) that license such inferences; and the potentially reflexive (or self-conscious) and destabilizing (or ontology-transforming) relations individuals bearing such identities have towards each other and themselves. In addition to social statuses (like boy and girl), it also takes into account mental states (like belief versus doubt) and material substances (like human versus machine). It thereby focuses on the relations between social-cultural, cognitive-affective, and material-technical modes of identity; the types of signs that inferentially and indexically lead to and follow from such underlying kinds; and the epistemic, affective, and moral commitments such semiotic processes involve. And though it is grounded in the dynamics of real-time, face-to-face interaction, it develops the repercussions of its analysis for digitally mediated and pervasively networked forms of interaction. While it thus began with what may be called 'the Huckleberry Finn Test' (boy versus girl in face-to-face interaction), it will conclude with a discussion of the Turing Test (computer versus human in teletype-mediated communication). It argues that most thought about this test has focused on a very limited type of inference. And it shows four other important ways our indexical encounters with others can both transform, and be transformed by, our ontologies.

## 2. Ontologies and their transformations

As introduced above, the term *index* will be used to refer to any quality that is relatively perceivable to some agent (e.g. actions like wearing a bonnet and threading needles). The term *kind* will be used to refer to any projected propensity to exhibit particular indices (e.g. boy and girl). The term *agent* will be used to refer to any entity that can perceive such an index and thereby project such a kind (e.g. Mrs. Loftus). The term *individual* will be used to refer to any entity that can evince indices to an agent and thereby be a site to project kindedness by that agent (e.g. Huckleberry Finn). And the term *ontology* will be used to refer to an agent's assumptions as to the indices, kinds, and individuals that constitute a particular world (e.g. the partially articulatable beliefs of Mrs. Loftus). See Table 1.

Crucially, not only are social statuses (speaker, banker, woman, etc.) kinds, but so are mental states (believing X, fearing Y, etc.), and material substances (gold, water, snow, etc.). In particular, interpreting agents can project such kinds onto particular individuals (such as *this stuff*, *that woman*, *my dog*) as a function of the indices they evince (the clothes they wear, the actions they undertake, the temperatures at which they freeze, the things they say, the relations they have to each other, and so forth). *That's gold*, *she's a banker*, *he's afraid of the dark*. In this way, ontologies drive interpretation: by your index (sign), I may infer your kind (object), and thereby come to expect (interpretant) other indices that would be in keeping with your kind (insofar as I have a particular ontology).

But rather than focusing on how *ontologies mediate interpretations*, which is as far as we can get with a single passage from Huckleberry Finn, we are also interested in how *interpretations mediate ontologies*.

For present purposes, there are five kinds of ontological transformativity—whereby an interpreting agent's ontology transforms via indexical encounters with an individual. See Table 2. The first kind of transformativity is simply performativity in a relatively generalized sense: some index, or ensemble of indices, may change an individual's kind more or less irrespective of some particular agent's assumptions about it. Here go all the usual processes that produce kinds in the first place, from chemical reactions to marriage ceremonies, from performative utterances to contractual agreements, from socialization practices to evolutionary processes. The second kind of transformativity is perhaps the most quotidian and is often relatively

**Table 1**  
Some key constituents of ontologies.

<i>Index</i>	Any quality that is relatively perceivable (to some agent)
<i>Kind</i>	Any projected propensity to exhibit particular indices
<i>Agent</i>	Any entity that can perceive such an index and project such a kind (itself often an individual)
<i>Individual</i>	Any entity that can evince indices (to an agent) and thereby be a site to project kindedness (by that agent)
<i>Ontology</i>	The assumptions an agent has as to the indices, kinds, and individuals that constitute a particular world

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