

Kierkegaard on the Internet: Anonymity versus Commitment in the Present Age

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I. How the Press and the Public Undermine Responsibility and Commitment

In his essay, The Present Ageⁱ, written in 1850, Kierkegaard warns that his age is characterized by a disinterested reflection that levels all differences of status and value. In his terms it levels all qualitative distinctions. Everything is equal. Nothing matters enough that one would be willing to die for it. Nietzsche gave this modern condition a name; he called it nihilism.

Kierkegaard blames this leveling on what he calls the Public. He says that “In order that everything should be reduced to the same level, it is first of all necessary to produce a phantom, its spirit a monstrous abstraction...and that phantom is *the Public*.”(59) But the real villain behind the Public, Kierkegaard claims, is the Press. He feared that “Europe will come to a standstill at the Press and remain at a standstill as a reminder that the human race has invented something which will eventually overpower it.” (Journals, Vol. 2, 483.) and he adds “Even if my life had no other significance, I am satisfied with having discovered the absolutely demoralizing existence of the daily press.” (JP 2163)

But why blame leveling on the Public rather than on democracy, technology, consumerism, or loss of respect for the tradition, to name a few candidates? And why this monomaniac demonizing of the Press? Kierkegaard answers in his journals that “Actually it is the Press, more specifically the daily newspaper...which make[s] Christianity impossible.”ⁱⁱ This is an amazing claim. Clearly, Kierkegaard saw the Press as a unique Cultural/Religious threat, but it will take a little while to explain why.

It is no accident that, writing around 1850, Kierkegaard choose to attack the Public and the Press. To understand why he did so, we have to begin a century earlier. In The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphereⁱⁱⁱ Jürgen Habermas locates the beginning of the public domain in the middle of the 18th century. He explains that at that time the Press and coffee houses became the locus of a new form of political discussion. This new form of discourse is radically different from the ancient polis or republic; the modern public understands itself as being outside political power. This extra-political

status is not just defined negatively, as a lack of political power, but seen positively. Just because public opinion is not an exercise of political power, it is protected from any partisan spirit. Enlightenment intellectuals saw the public domain as a space in which the rational, disinterested reflection that should guide government and human life could be institutionalized and refined. Such disengaged discussion came to be seen as an essential feature of a free society. As the Press extended the Public debate to a wider and wider readership of ordinary citizens, Burke exalted that, “in a free country, every man thinks he has a concern in all public matters.”^{iv}

Over the next century, thanks to the expansion of the daily press, the Public became increasingly democratized until this democratization had a surprising result which, according to Habermas, “altered [the] social preconditions of ‘public opinion’ around the middle of the [19th] century.”^v “[As] the Public was expanded ... by the proliferation of the Press...the reign of public opinion appeared as the reign of the many and mediocre.”^{vi} Many people including J. S. Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville feared “the tyranny of public opinion”^{vii}, and Mill felt called upon to protect “nonconformists from the grip of the Public itself.”^{viii} According to Habermas, Tocqueville insisted that “education and powerful citizens were supposed to form an *elite public* whose critical debate determined public opinion.”^{ix}

The Present Age shows just how original Kierkegaard was. While Tocqueville and Mill claimed that the masses needed elite philosophical leadership and, while Habermas agrees with them that what happen around 1850 with the democratization of the Public by the daily press is an unfortunate decline into mediocrity from which the Public must be saved, Kierkegaard sees the Public Sphere as a new and dangerous cultural phenomenon in which the leveling produced by the Press brings out something that was deeply wrong with the Enlightenment idea of detached reflection from the start. Thus, while Habermas is concerned to recapture the moral and political virtues of the Public Sphere, Kierkegaard brilliantly sees that there is no way to salvage the Public Sphere since, unlike concrete groups and crowds, it was from the start the source of leveling.

This leveling was produced in several ways. First, the new massive distribution of desituated information was making every sort of information immediately available to

anyone, thereby producing a desituated, detached spectator. The new power of the Press to disseminate information to everyone in a nation and beyond led its readers to transcend their local, personal involvement and overcome their reticence about what didn't directly concern them. As Burke had noted with joy, the Press encouraged everyone to form an opinion about everything. This is seen by Habermas as a triumph of democratization but Kierkegaard saw that the Public Sphere was destined to become a realm of idle talk in which spectators merely pass the word along.

The Press and its decadent descendant, the talk show, are bad enough, but this demoralizing effect was not Kierkegaard's main concern. For Kierkegaard the deeper danger is just what Habermas applauds about the public sphere, viz., as Kierkegaard puts it, "a public ...destroys everything that is relative, concrete and particular in life." (62) The public sphere thus promotes ubiquitous commentators who deliberately detach themselves from the local practices out of which specific issues grow and in terms of which these issues must be resolved through some sort of committed action. The public sphere is thus a domain in which everyone has an opinion about, and comments on, all public matters without needing any first-hand experience, and without having or wanting any responsibility. What seems a virtue to detached Enlightenment reason, therefore, looks like a disastrous drawback to Kierkegaard.

Even the most conscientious commentators don't have to have first-hand experience or take a concrete stand. Rather, as Kierkegaard complains, they justify their views by citing principles. Since the conclusions such abstract reasoning reaches are not grounded in the local practices, its solutions are equally abstract. Such proposals would presumably not enlist the commitment of the people involved and therefore not work even if turned into laws.

More basically still, that the Public Sphere lies outside of political power meant, for Kierkegaard, that one could hold an opinion on anything without having to act on it. He notes with disapproval, that the public's "ability, virtuosity and good sense consists in trying to reach a judgment and a decision without ever going so far as action." (33) This opens up the possibility of endless reflection. If there is no possibility of decision and action, one can look at all things from all sides and always find some new perspective from which to put everything into question again. Kierkegaard saw, when everything is

up for endless critical commentary, action finally becomes impossible. “[A]t any moment reflection is capable of explaining everything quite differently and allowing one some way of escape....” (42) He is therefore clear that “reflection by transforming the capacity for action into a means of escape from action, is both corrupt and dangerous....”(68) Therefore the motto Kierkegaard suggested for the Press was: “Here men are demoralized in the shortest possible time on the largest possible scale, at the cheapest possible price.” (Journals, Vol. 2, 489)

The problem is that the Press speaks for the Public but no one stands behind the views the Public holds. Thus Kierkegaard wrote in his Journal: “...here ... are the two most dreadful calamities which really are the principle powers of impersonality--the Press and anonymity” (Journals and Papers Vol. 2, 480). And he puts it even more clearly in The Present Age: “A public is neither a nation, nor a generation, nor a community, nor a society, nor these particular men, for all these are only what they are through the concrete; *no single person who belong to the Public makes a real commitment.*”(63)(My italics.)

In The Present Age Kierkegaard succinctly sums up his view of the relation of the Press, the Public, and the leveling going on in his time. The desituated and anonymous press and the lack of passion or commitment in his reflective age combine to produce the Public, the agent of the nihilistic leveling characteristic of his time and ours.

The Press is an abstraction ... which in conjunction with the passionless and reflective character of the age produces that abstract phantom: a public which in its turn is really the leveling power.(64)

Kierkegaard would surely have seen in the Internet, with its web sites full of anonymous information from all over the world and its interest groups which anyone in the world can join without qualifications and where one can discuss any topic endlessly without consequences, the hi-tech synthesis of the worst features of the newspaper and the coffee house Burke’s dream has been realized for, in interest groups, anyone, anywhere can have an opinion on anything. All are only too eager to respond to the equally deracinated opinions of other anonymous amateurs who post their views from nowhere. Such commentators do not take a stand on the issues they speak about. Indeed, the very ubiquity of the Net generally makes any such local stand seem irrelevant.

What is striking about such interest groups is that no experience or skill is required to enter the conversation. Indeed, a serious danger of the Public Sphere, as illustrated on the Internet, is that it undermines expertise. Acquiring a skill requires seeing the situation as being of a sort that requires a certain action, taking that action, and learning from the results. As Kierkegaard understood, there is no way to gain practical wisdom but by making risky commitments and thereby experiencing both failure and success. Studies of skill acquisition have shown that, unless the outcome matters and unless the person developing the skill is willing to accept the pain that comes from failure and the elation that comes with success, the learner will be stuck at the level of competence and never achieve mastery. Thus the heroes of the Public Sphere who appear on serious radio and TV programs, such as the MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour, have a view on every issue, and can justify their view by appeal to abstract principles, but they do not have to act on the principles they defend and therefore lack the commitment and responsibility that alone can lead to serious error and also to the gradual acquisition of practical wisdom.

What Kierkegaard envisaged as a consequence of the Press's irresponsible and uncommitted coverage is now fully realized on the World Wide Web. Thanks to hyperlinks, meaningful differences have, indeed, been leveled. Relevance and significance have disappeared. And this is an important part of the attraction of the web. Nothing is too trivial to be included. Nothing is so important that it demands a special place. In his religious writing Kierkegaard criticized the implicit nihilism in the idea that God is equally concerned with the salvation of a sinner and the fall of a sparrow. "For [such a] God there is nothing significant and nothing insignificant,, " he said. On the Web, the attraction and the danger is that everyone can take this godlike point of view. One can view a coffee pot in Cambridge, England, a street corner in New York, the latest supernova, look up references in a library in Alexandria, find out what fellowships are available to a person with one's profile, or direct a robot to plant and water a seed in Austria, not to mention plow through thousands of ads, all with equal ease and equal lack of any sense of what is important.

Kierkegaard even saw that the ultimate activity the Internet would encourage would be speculation on how big it is, how much bigger it will get, and what, if anything,

all this means for our culture. This sort of discussion is, of course, in danger of becoming part of the very cloud of anonymous speculation Kierkegaard abhorred. Ever sensitive to his own position as a speaker, Kierkegaard concluded his analysis of the dangers of the present age and his dark predictions of what was ahead for Europe with the ironic remark that: "In our times, when so little is done, an extraordinary number of prophecies, apocalypses, glances at and studies of the future appear, and there is nothing to do but to join in and be one with the rest" (85).

The only alternative Kierkegaard saw to the paralyzing reflection of the Public was to plunge into some kind of activity -- any activity -- as long as one threw oneself into it with passionate involvement. In The Present Age he exhorts his contemporaries to make just such a risky leap:

There is no more action or decision in our day than there is perilous delight in swimming in shallow waters. But just as a grown-up, struggling delightedly in the waves, calls to those younger than himself: 'Come on, jump in quickly'—the decision in existence ... calls out.... Come on, leap cheerfully, even if it means a lighthearted leap, so long as it is decisive. If you are capable of being a man, then danger and the harsh judgment of existence on your thoughtlessness will help you become one.(36-37).

II. The Aesthetic Sphere: The Enjoyment of Endless Possibilities

Such a light hearted leap out of the shallow, leveled present age into the deeper water is typified for Kierkegaard by people who leap into what he calls the *aesthetic sphere of existence*. Unlike the Public Sphere which Kierkegaard would not consider a sphere at all, each sphere of existence, as we shall see, represents a way of trying to get out of the leveling of the present age by making some way of life absolute. In the aesthetic sphere, people make enjoyment of possibilities the center of their lives.

Such an aesthetic response is characteristic of the Net-surfer for whom information gathering becomes a way of life. Such a surfer is curious about everything and ready to spend every free moment visiting the latest hot spots on the Web. He or she enjoys the sheer range of possibilities. Something interesting is only a click away.

Commitment to a life of curiosity where information is a boundless source of enjoyment puts one in the reflective version of what Kierkegaard calls *the aesthetic*

sphere of existence -- his anticipation of postmodernity. For such a person just visiting as many sites as possible and keeping up on the cool ones is an end in itself. The only meaningful distinction is between those sites that are *interesting* and those that are *boring*. Life consists in fighting off boredom by being a spectator at everything interesting in the universe and in communicating with everyone else so inclined. Such a life produces a self that has no defining content or continuity but is open to all possibilities and to constantly taking on new roles.

But we have still to explain what makes this use of the Web so attractive. Why is there a thrill in being able to find out about everything no matter how trivial? What motivates a passionate commitment to curiosity? Kierkegaard thought that in the last analysis people were addicted to the Press, and we can now add the Web, because the anonymous spectator *takes no risks*. The person in the aesthetic sphere keeps open all possibilities and has no fixed identity that could be threatened by disappointment, humiliation, failure or loss.

Surfing the Web is ideally suited to such a life. On the Internet, commitments are at best virtual commitments. Sherry Turkle has described how the Net is changing the background practices that determine what kinds of selves we can be. In *Life on the Screen*, she details “the ability of the Internet to change popular understandings of identity.” On the Internet, she tells us, “we are encouraged to think of ourselves as fluid, emergent, decentralized, multiplicitous, flexible, and ever in process.”^x Thus “the Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life.”^{xi} Turkle realizes that the Net encourages what she calls “experimentation” because what one does on the Net has no consequences. She therefore thinks that the Net not only gives people access to all sorts of information; it frees people to develop new and exciting selves.

The person in the aesthetic sphere of existence would surely agree, but according to Kierkegaard: “As a result of knowing and being everything possible, one is in contradiction with oneself” (68). When he is speaking from the point of view of the next higher sphere of existence, Kierkegaard, tells us that the self requires not “variableness and brilliancy” but “firmness, balance, and steadiness” (Either/Or Vol. II (16,17).

We would therefore expect the aesthetic sphere to reveal that it was ultimately unlivable, and, indeed, Kierkegaard holds that if one leaps into the aesthetic sphere with total commitment it is bound to break down under the sheer glut of information and possibilities. Without some way of telling the relevant from the irrelevant and the significance from the insignificant everything becomes equally interesting and equally boring. Writing from the perspective of someone experiencing the melancholy that signals the breakdown of the aesthetic sphere he laments: “My reflection on life altogether lacks meaning. I take it some evil spirit has put a pair of spectacles on my nose, one glass of which magnifies to an enormous degree, while the other reduces to the same degree” (Either/Or, 46).

This inability to distinguish the trivial from the important eventually stops being thrilling and leads to the very boredom the aesthete and net surfer dedicate their lives to avoiding. Thus, Kierkegaard concludes: “every aesthetic view of life is despair, and everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair whether he knows it or not. But when one knows it a higher form of existence is an imperative requirement” (Either/Or, Vol. II, 197).

III. The Ethical Sphere: Making Concrete Commitments

That higher form of existence Kierkegaard calls *the ethical sphere*. In it one has a stable identity and one is committed to involved action. Information is not denigrated but is sought and used for serious purposes. As long as information gathering is not an end in itself, whatever reliable information there is on the Web can serve serious commitments. Such commitments require that people have life plans and take up serious tasks. They then have goals that determine what needs to be done and what information is relevant for doing it.

In so far as the Internet can reveal and support the making and maintaining of commitments for action, it supports life in the ethical sphere. But Kierkegaard would probably hold that the huge number of interest groups on the Net committed to various causes, and the ease of joining such groups, would eventually bring about the breakdown of the ethical sphere. The multiplicity of causes and the ease of making commitments, which should have supported action, will eventually lead either to paralysis or an arbitrary choice as to which commitments to take seriously.

To avoid arbitrary choice, one might, like Judge William, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author of the description of the ethical sphere in Either/Or, turn to facts about one's life—for example one's talents and one's job to limit one's commitments. Thus, Judge William says that his range of possible relevant commitments are constrained by his abilities and social roles as judge and husband. Or, to take a more contemporary example, one could choose which interest groups to join on the basis of certain facts about one's life-situation. After all, there are not merely interest groups devoted to popular stars, and to cultural stars like Kierkegaard, there are serious interest groups, for example groups for the parents of children with rare and incurable diseases. So the ethical net-enthusiast might argue that all he needs to do is to accept a perspective --something that matters based on some accident in his life -- and make all his choices with respect to that.

But the goal of the person in the ethical sphere, as Kierkegaard defines it, is to be morally mature, and Kant held that moral maturity consists in the ability to choose what one does on the basis of principles one can justify. Only then can one take lucid responsibility for one's life. Thus Judge William is proud of the fact that, as an autonomous agent, he is free to give whatever meaning he chooses to his talents and his roles, so, in the end it turns out that his freedom is not constrained by his given station and its duties.

Judge William sees that the choice as to which commitments are important is based on a more fundamental choice of what is worthy and not worthy, what is good and what is evil, and that choice is up to him. As Judge William puts it:

The good *is* for the fact that I will it, and apart from my willing, it has no existence. This is the expression for freedom. ... By this the distinctive notes of good and evil are by no means belittled or disparaged as merely subjective distinctions. On the contrary, the absolute validity of these distinctions is affirmed" (Either/Or, Vol. II, 228).

But Kierkegaard would respond, if everything is up for choice, including the standards on the basis of which one chooses, there is no reason for choosing one set of standards rather than another. Besides, if one were totally free, choosing the guidelines for one's life would never make any serious difference, since one could always choose to

rescind one's previous choice. Any commitment I make does not get a grip on me if I am always free to revoke it. Indeed, commitments that are freely chosen can and should be revised from minute to minute as new information comes along. The ethical thus breaks down because the pure power to make and unmake commitments undermines itself.

As Kierkegaard puts it:

If the despairing self is *active*, ... it is constantly relating to itself only experimentally, no matter what it undertakes, however great, however amazing and with whatever perseverance. It recognizes no power over itself; therefore in the final instance it lacks seriousness.... The self can, at any moment, start quite arbitrarily all over again and, however far an idea is pursued in practice, the entire action is contained within an hypothesis (Sickness unto Death, 100).

One can take over some accidental fact about one's life and make it one's own only by freely *deciding* that it is crucially important, but then one can equally freely decide it is not, so in the ethical sphere all meaningful differences are leveled by one's making one's freedom absolute. Thus the *choice* of qualitative distinctions that was supposed to support serious action undermines it, and one ends up in what Kierkegaard calls the despair of the ethical.

IV. The Public Sphere vs. the Religious Sphere: Making One Unconditional Commitment

According to Kierkegaard, one can only stop the leveling of the present age by being *given* an individual identity that opens up an individual world. Fortunately, the ethical view of commitments as freely entered into and always open to being revoked does not seem to hold for those commitments that are most important to us. These special commitments are experienced as grabbing my whole being. When I respond to such a summons with what Kierkegaard calls infinite passion, i.e. when I make an *unconditional commitment*, this commitment determines what will be the significant issue for me for the rest of my life. In Kierkegaard's terms, it gives me the eternal in time. Political and religious movements can grab us in this way as can love relationships and, for certain people, such "vocations" as the science or art. Living by such an irrevocable commitment puts one in what Kierkegaard called the Christian/Religious sphere of existence.

These unconditional commitments are different from the normal sorts of commitments. They determine what counts as worthwhile by determining who one is. Strong identities based on unconditional commitments, then, stop the proliferation of everyday commitments by determining what ultimately matters and why. They thus block nihilism by establishing qualitative distinctions between what is important and trivial, relevant and irrelevant, serious and playful in an individual life.

But, of course, such a commitment is risky. One's cause may fail. One's lover may leave. The detached reflection of the present age, the hyperflexibility of the aesthetic sphere, and the unbounded freedom of the ethical sphere are all ways of avoiding risk, but it turns out, Kierkegaard claims, that for that very reason they level all qualitative distinctions and end in the despair of meaninglessness. Only an unconditional commitment and the strong identity it produces can give an individual a world organized by that individual's unique qualitative distinctions.

This leads to the perplexing question: What role can the Internet play in encouraging and supporting unconditional commitments? A first suggestion might be that the movement from sphere to sphere will be facilitated by the Web, just as flight simulators help one learn to fly. One would be solicited to throw oneself into net surfing and find that boring; then into making commitments until they proliferated absurdly; and so finally be driven to let oneself be drawn into a risky unconditional commitment as the only way out of despair. Indeed, at any stage from looking for all sorts of interesting Web sites as one surfs the Net, to striking up a conversation in a chat room, to committing oneself to an interest group that opened up a new domain, one might just get hooked by one of the ways of life opened up and find oneself drawn into a world-defining lifetime commitment. No doubt this might happen--people do meet in chat rooms and fall in love--but it is highly unlikely.

Kierkegaard would surely argue that, while the Internet, like the Press, does not prohibit unconditional commitments, in the end, it undermines them. Like a simulator the Net manages to capture everything but the risk. Our imaginations can be drawn in, as they are in playing games and watching movies, and no doubt game simulations sharpen our responses for non-game situations, but so far as games work by capturing our imaginations, they will fail to give us serious commitments. Imagined commitments hold

us only when our imaginations are captivated by the simulations before our ears and eyes. And that is what computer games and the Net offer us. The temptation is to live in a world of stimulating images and simulated commitments and thus to lead a simulated life. As Kierkegaard says of the present age, “It transforms the real task into an unreal trick and reality into a play.” (38)

The test as to whether one had acquired an unconditional commitment would come if one had the incentive and courage to transfer what one had learned on the net to the real world. Then one would confront what Kierkegaard calls “the danger and the harsh judgment of existence”. But precisely the attraction of the Net like that of the Press in Kierkegaard’s time, inhibits that final plunge. Indeed, anyone using the Net who was led to risk his or her real identity in the real world would have to act against the grain of what attracted him or her to the Net in the first place.

So it looks like Kierkegaard may be right. The Press and the Internet are the ultimate enemy of the unconditional commitment, what he calls the religious sphere of existence, and only such commitments can save us from the leveling launched by the Enlightenment, promoted by the Press and the Public Sphere, and perfected in the World Wide Web.

ⁱ Søren Kierkegaard, the Present Age, trans. Alexander Dru, Harper and Row, 1962. Reference to this edition of The Present Age are in parentheses in the text.

ⁱⁱ Pap. X, 2A 17: J & P no. 2163, cited by Strangerup.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jürgen Habermas, The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, The MIT Press, 1989.

^{iv} Ibid. 94

^v Ibid., 130

^{vi} Ibid., 131, 133

^{vii} Ibid., 138

^{viii} Ibid., 134

^{ix} Ibid., 137

^x Sherry Turkle, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995) 263-264.

^{xi} Ibid., 180.