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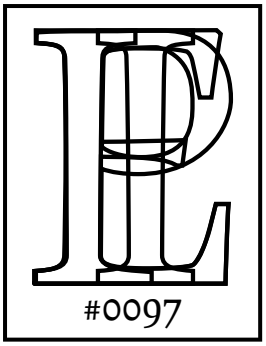

Kierkegaard on the Internet: Anonymity vs. Commitment in the Present Age

By Hubert L. Dreyfus
(Published: 1996)

To understand why Kierkegaard would have hated the Internet we need to understand what he meant by the Public and why he was so opposed to the Press. The focus of his concern was what Habermas calls the Public Sphere which, in the middle of the nineteenth century, thanks to the recent democratization and expansion of the press, had become a serious problem for many intellectuals. But while thinkers like Mill and Tocqueville thought the problem was "the tyranny of the masses," Kierkegaard thought that the Public Sphere, as implemented in the Press, promoted risk-free anonymity and idle curiosity, both of which undermined responsibility and commitment. This, in turn, leveled all qualitative distinctions and led to nihilism, he held. Kierkegaard might well have denounced the Internet for the same reasons. Kierkegaard's likely objections are spelled out by considering how the Net promotes Kierkegaard's two nihilistic spheres of existence, the aesthetic and the ethical, while repelling the re- ligious sphere. In the aesthetic sphere, the aesthete avoids commitments and lives in the categories of the interesting and the boring and wants to see as many interesting sights (sites) as possible. People in the ethical sphere could use the Internet to make and keep track of commitments but would be brought to the "despair of possibility" by the ease of making and unmaking commitments on the Net. Only in the religious sphere is nihilism overcome by making a risky, unconditional commitment. The Internet, however, which offers a risk-free simulated world, would tend to undermine rather than support any such ultimate concern.

Filed under: cyb3rsp4c3 / society (and modernity)
Available at: https://pile.sdbs.cz/item/97

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Abstract

To understand why Kierkegaard would have hated the Internet we need to understand what he meant by the Public and why he was so opposed to the Press. The focus of his concern was what Habermas calls the Public Sphere which, in the middle of the nineteenth century, thanks to the recent democratization and expansion of the press, had become a serious problem for many intellectuals. But while thinkers like Mill and Tocqueville thought the problem was "the tyranny of the masses," Kierkegaard thought that the Public Sphere, as implemented in the Press, promoted risk-free anonymity and idle curiosity, both of which undermined responsibility and commitment. This, in turn, leveled all qualitative distinctions and led to nihilism, he held. Kierkegaard might well have denounced the Internet for the same reasons. Kierkegaard's likely objections are spelled out by considering how the Net promotes Kierkegaard's two nihilistic spheres of existence, the aesthetic and the ethical, while repelling the religious sphere. In the aesthetic sphere, the aesthete avoids commitments and lives in the categories of the interesting and the boring and wants to see as many interesting sights (sites) as possible. People in the ethical sphere could use the Internet to make and keep track of commitments but would be brought to the "despair of possibility" by the ease of making and unmaking commitments on the Net. Only in the religious sphere is nihilism overcome by making a risky, unconditional commitment. The Internet, however, which offers a risk-free simulated world, would tend to undermine rather than support any such ultimate concern.

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

In the section of *A Literary Review* entitled "The Present Age,"[1] Kierkegaard warns that his age is characterized by a disinterested reflection and curiosity that levels all differences of status and value.

[1] Translated separately by Alexander Dru as *The Present Age*, New York: Harper and Row 1962. References to this edition are given in parentheses in the text.

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He blames this leveling on what he calls the Public. He says that "[i]n 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" (p. 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 eventually overpowered it,"[2] and he adds: "Even if my life had no other significance, well, I am satisfied with having discovered the absolutely demoralizing existence of the daily press."[3]

But why blame leveling on the Public rather than on democracy, technology, consumerism, or loss of respect for tradition, to name a few candidates? And why this monomaniacal demonizing of the Press? Commentators have noted the problem. For example, Hakon Strangerup remarks that "the Danish daily press was on an extremely modest scale in [Kierkegaard's] lifetime,"[4] and asks: "How, then, is SK's preoccupation with these trifling papers to be explained?"[5] He answers that Kierkegaard's strident opposition to the Press had political, psychological and sociological motivations.

First, the Press was the mouthpiece for liberalism and this "filled the deeply conservative SK with horror."[6] But this is not convincing for, in *The Review* at least, Kierkegaard does not attack the Press for being liberal, or for any political stand. I will argue in a moment that Kierkegaard would have hated the newspapers and TV talk shows on the right just as much as those on the left. Then there was, of course, the *Corsair* affair. Strangerup tell us that "[f]rom then on the tone of SK's polemic with the Press changes from irony to hatred of the Press as such."[7] But the *Corsair* affair occurred after the publication of the *Review* and so cannot account for the vehemence with which Kierkegaard blames the Press for all the evils of the present age. In any case I think the evidence is clear that he thinks that personal attacks are only one unfortunate side effect of what is essentially dangerous about the Press as such. Indeed, Kierkegaard quite sensibly

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[2] *Pap.* IX A 378 / *JP* II 2157, p. 483, 1848.
[3] *Pap.* X 2 A 17, 1847 / *JP* II 2163.
[4] Hakon Stangerup "His Polemic with the Press" in *Kierkegaard as a Person,* ed. by Niels and Marie Thulstrup, Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Forlag 1983, p. 119.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., p. 120.
[7] Ibid., p. 122.

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holds that such degrading gossip is only a "minor affair."[8] Finally, Strangerup tells us that Kierkegaard had "contempt for [journalists'] low social status,"[9] but I think it will soon be clear that he would have hated the snobbish and self-righteous William Buckley as much as the lower class felon, Gordon Liddy. None of Strangerup's three reasons, nor all of them combined, explains why Kierkegaard says in his journals that "[a]ctually it is the Press, more specifically the daily newspaper...which make[s] Christianity impossible."[10] Clearly, besides his political, psychological, and sociological reservations concerning the daily press, Kierkegaard saw the Press as a unique cultural/religious threat.

It is no accident that, writing in 1846, Kierkegaard chose 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 Sphere*[11] Jürgen Habermas locates the beginning of what he calls the Public Sphere in the middle of the eighteenth century. He explains that, at that time, the Press and coffee houses became the locus of a new form of political discussion. This new sphere of discourse is radically different from the ancient polis or republic; the modern Public Sphere 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 Sphere 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 exulted that, "In a free country, every man thinks he has a concern in all public matters."[12]

Over the next century, thanks to the expansion of the daily press, the Public Sphere became increasingly democratized until this democratization had a surprising result which, according to Habermas, "altered [the] social preconditions of 'public opinion' around the

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[8] Ibid., p. 123.
[9] Ibid., p. 124.
[10] *Pap.* X, 2 A 17 / *JP* II 2163, cited by Stangerup.
[11] Jürgen Habermas *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 1989.
[12] Ibid., p. 94.

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middle of the [nineteenth] century."[13] "[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."[14] Many people, including J.S. Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville, feared "the tyranny of public opinion,"[15] and Mill felt called upon to protect "nonconformists from the grip of the Public itself."[16] According to Habermas, Tocqueville insisted that "education and powerful citizens were supposed to form an *elite public* whose critical debate determined public opinion."[17]

But leveling to the lowest common denominator was not primarily what Kierkegaard feared. The section of the *Review* on "the present age" is concerned not primarily with "the merging of the individual with the group," nor with the conformism of the masses which Kierkegaard called "the crowd," nor with what Alastair Hannay calls "the eliminating of grades of authority within and between groups."[18] Although Kierkegaard is concerned with all these phenomena, according to him they are not dangerous in themselves since they can and do occur in a positive, passionate revolutionary age such as the age of the French Revolution. If an elitist disgust with the crowd were the basis of Kierkegaard's attack on the Public and the Press, his polemic would ironically itself be a case of conforming to the intellectual worries of his time.

In fact, however, "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 happens around 1850 with the democratization of the Public Sphere by the daily press is an unfortunate decline into conformism from which the Public Sphere 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

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[13] Ibid., p. 130.
[14] Ibid., pp. 131,133.
[15] Ibid., p. 138.
[16] Ibid., p. 134.
[17] Ibid., p. 137.
[18] Alastair Hannay *Kierkegaard*, London: Routledge, 2nd ed. 1991 [1982], p. 293.

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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 led its readers to transcend their local, personal involvement and overcome their reticence about what did not directly concern them. As Burke had noted with joy, the Press encouraged everyone to develop 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.

This demoralization reaches its lowest form in the yellow journalism of scandal sheets like the *Corsair*. Since the members of the Public being outside political power take no stand, the Public Sphere, through the Press, removes all seriousness from human action so that, at the limit, the Press becomes a voyeuristic form of irresponsible amusement that enjoys the undermining of "outstanding individuals."

> If we imagine the Press growing weaker and weaker because no events or ideas catch hold of the age, the more easily will the process of leveling become a harmful pleasure. More and more individuals, owing to their bloodless indolence, will aspire to be nothing at all – in order to become the Public: that abstract whole formed in the must ludicrous way, by all participants becoming a third-party [an onlooker]....This gallery is on the look-out for distraction and soon abandons itself to the idea that everything that any one does is done in order to give it [the Public] something to gossip about. (pp. 64, 65)

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" (p. 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. What seems a virtue to detached Enlightenment reason, therefore, looks like a disastrous drawback to Kierkegaard. The Public Sphere is a world in which everyone has an opinion on, and comments on, all public matters without needing any first-hand experience and without having or wanting any responsibility.

Even the most conscientious commentators are not required to have first-hand experience or take a concrete stand. Rather, they justify

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their views by citing principles, and, as Kierkegaard notes with disapproval, their "ability, virtuosity and good sense consists in trying to reach a judgment and a decision without ever going so far as action" (p. 33). Moreover, 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 acted upon. Kierkegaard concludes that "what...the speakers at a meeting understand perfectly presented to them as a thought or an observation, they cannot understand at all in the form of action" (p. 39).

More basically still, that the Public Sphere lies outside political power so that anyone can hold an opinion on anything without having to act on it, 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..." (p. 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..."(p. 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."[19] This demoralization clearly transcends liberal politics, yellow journalism, and the uncouth manners of reporters.

The real 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: "[H]ere...are the two most dreadful calamities which really are the principle powers of impersonality – the Press and anonymity."[20] As Kierkegaard puts it even more clearly in the *Review*: "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 belongs to the Public makes a real commitment.*" (p. 63, my italics). As we shall see, this is the sense in which the Public and the Press make Christianity impossible.

Kierkegaard succinctly sums up his view of the relation of the Press, the Public Sphere, and the leveling going on in his time. The

[19] *Pap.* X 5 A 138, 1853 / *JP* II 2171.
[20] *Pap.* VIII 1 A 540, 1848 / *JP* II 2152.

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desituated and anonymous press and the lack of passion or commitment in our reflective age combine to produce the Public, the agent of the nihilistic leveling characteristic of his time and ours. "The Press is an abstraction (since a newspaper is not a concrete part of a nation and only in an abstract sense an individual) 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" (p. 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 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. On their web page anyone can put any alleged information into circulation. Kierkegaard could have been speaking of the Internet when he said of the Press, "[i]t is frightful that someone who is no one...can set any error into circulation with no thought of responsibility and with the aid of this dreadful disproportioned means of communication."[21] And in interest groups anyone can have an opinion on anything. In both cases, 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. Learning a skill requires interpreting 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 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 United States' MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour, with views on every issue justified by appealing to abstract principles, but who do

[21] Ibid.

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not have to act on the principles they espouse and therefore lack the passionate perspective that alone can lead to risk of serious error, do not acquire wisdom.

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" (p. 85).

The only alternative Kierkegaard saw to this paralyzing reflection was to plunge into some kind of activity – any activity – as long as one threw oneself into it with passionate involvement. In the *Review* he exhorts his contemporaries to make such a 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 light-hearted 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. (pp. 36-37)

II. The Aesthetic Sphere: The Enjoyment of Endless Possibilities

Such a light-hearted leap into the deeper water is typified by the net-surfer for whom information gathering has become 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

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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 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 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, "we are encouraged to think of ourselves as fluid, emergent, decentralized, multiplicious, flexible, and ever in process," she tells us.[22] Thus "the Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life."[23] Chat rooms lend themselves to the possibility of playing at being many selves, none of whom is recognized as who one truly is, and this possibility is not just theoretical but actually introduces new social practices. Turkle tells us that: "The rethinking of human...identity is not taking place just among philosophers but on the ground, through a philosophy in everyday life that is in some measure both proved and carried by the computer presence."[24] She 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" (p. 68). When he is speaking from the point of view of the next higher sphere

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[22] Sherry Turkle *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, New York: Simon and Schuster 1995, pp. 263-264.

[23] Ibid., p. 180.

[24] Ibid., p. 26.

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of existence, Kierkegaard tells us that the self requires not "the variable and brilliant" but "firmness and constancy...and steadiness."[25]

We would therefore expect the aesthetic sphere to reveal that it was ultimately unlivable, and, indeed, Kierkegaard held that if one threw oneself into the aesthetic sphere with total commitment it was bound to break down under the sheer glut of information and possibilities. With no 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."[26]

This inability to distinguish the trivial from the important eventually stops being thrilling and leads to the very boredom the aesthete and net surfer have dedicated their lives to avoiding. Thus, Kierkegaard concludes: "[E]very aesthetic view of life is despair, and everyone who lives aesthetically is in despair whether he knows it or not. But if one does know it...a higher form of existence is an inescapable requirement."[27]

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 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 be a valuable resource. It 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. Can the Net support this life of committed action?

If the Internet could reveal and support the making and maintaining of commitments for action, it would support, not undermine, the

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[25] *EOP*, p. 391.
[26] Ibid., p. 46.
[27] Ibid., p. 502.

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ethical commitments Kierkegaard maintains human beings need. Happily, we are now entering a second stage of information technology where it is becoming clear how the ethical sphere can be implemented by using computers to keep track of commitments in order to further the coordination of action. So far as the Internet develops means of communication that enable people to keep track of their commitments and to see how their speech acts open new domains of action, the Internet supports the ethical sphere.

But Kierkegaard would probably hold that, when the use of the Internet for the coordination of commitments is successfully instantiated in a communications system, the very ease of making commitments would further the inevitable breakdown of the ethical sphere. Each commitment we make has an enormous number of consequences, and we are solicited to take active responsibility for all the consequences that we recognize. So the more sensitive we are to commitments, the more conflicting solicitations we will encounter. And the more we decide a conflict by making one or another commitment, the more our commitments will proliferate into conflicts again. Thus the more developed a system for keeping track of commitments is, the more possible commitments it will keep track of, and its very ability to keep track of all commitments, which should have supported action, will lead instead to paralysis or arbitrary choice.

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 one's talents and one's job description to limit one's commitments. Judge William says that his range of possible relevant actions is constrained by his abilities and social roles as judge and husband. But Judge William admits, indeed he 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 his freedom is not constrained by his given station and its duties.

But, Kierkegaard argues, 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. Moreover, choosing the guidelines for one's life never makes any serious difference, since one can always choose to rescind one's previous choice. The ethical net-enthusiast will presumably answer that all the learner has to do is to choose a perspective – something that matters – and care about the outcome. But Kierkegaard would respond that the very ease of making choices on the Internet would ultimately lead to the inevitable breakdown of serious choice and so of the ethical

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sphere. Commitments that are freely chosen can and should be revised from minute to minute as new information comes along. But where there is no risk and every commitment can be revoked without consequences, choice becomes arbitrary and meaningless.

The ethical person responds to this breakdown by trying to choose which commitments are the most important ones. This choice is based on a more fundamental choice of what is worthy and not worthy, what good and what evil. As Judge William puts it: "The good *is* by virtue of my willing it, and otherwise it has no existence. This is the expression of freedom....This is in no way to belittle the categories of good and evil or to reduce them to purely subjective determinations. On the contrary, it is to assert the absolute validity of these categories."[28] The ethical thus breaks down because the power to make commitments undermines itself. Any commitment I make does not get a grip on me because I am always free to revoke it. Or else it must be constantly reconfirmed by a new commitment to take the previous one seriously. 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.[29]

Thus the *choice* of qualitative distinctions that was supposed to support action thwarts it, and one ends up in what Kierkegaard calls the despair of the ethical.[30] Kierkegaard concludes that one cannot stop the proliferating of information and commitments by *deciding* what is worth doing; one can only stop the proliferation of commitments by having an individual identity that opens up an individual world.

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[28] Ibid., p. 524.

[29] *SDP*, p. 100.

[30] Of course, for Kierkegaard this "despair of possibility" is only half the problem. The breakdown of the ethical also arises from the realization that one cannot get clear about one's motives as a Kantian ethics of intentions requires. For Kierkegaard, Sin, as for Heidegger, who stole the idea from him, ontological guilt, consists in the fact that Dasein cannot get behind its thrownness. As far as I can see, the despair of the ethical is never, as one sometimes reads in the literature, the failure of the individual to live up to the demands of the moral law. If that were the problem, one could, if one were careful and ethical enough, hope to avoid the despair of the ethical.

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

The view of commitments as 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 law or music.

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 one's life.

But, of course, such a commitment is risky. One's cause may fail. One's lover may leave. The curiosity 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 unconditioned commitment and the strong identity it produces give an individual a world with 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 stage to stage 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 and keeping commitments until they proliferated absurdly; and so finally be driven to let oneself be drawn into a risky identity 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 making commitments that open up new domains, 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 –

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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, allows unconditional commitments, far from encouraging them, it tends to turn all of life into a risk-free game. So, although it does not prohibit such commitments, in the end, it inhibits 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 commitment 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" (p. 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." And precisely the attraction of the Net like that of the Press in Kierkegaard's time, would inhibit 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. Thus Kierkegaard is right, the Press and the Internet are the ultimate enemy of the unconditional commitment which is the basis of Christianity. Only this highest religious sphere of existence can save us from the leveling launched by the Enlightenment and perfected in the Press and the Public Sphere.

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