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The Existential Challenges of Cyberspace

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THE EXISTENTIAL CHALLENGES OF CYBERSPACE

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Cyberspace is an emergent environment that has come to facilitate a growing range of human activity. Here, information is tightly woven, freed of unnecessary context and always within reach. This thesis explores the existential challenges that arise from increased engagement in this space and offers solutions informed by Henry Thoreau and Søren Kierkegaard. Section One offers an ontological account of cyberspace and describes its relationship to what I call the lifeworld. Section Two further examines the relationship drawn out in Section One, introduces the challenge of foreground saturation and appeals to Thoreau for solutions. Section Three introduces the concept of leveling as it is described by Kierkegaard, shows its connection to cyberspace and offers solutions drawn from the promise of technology, Kierkegaard and Thoreau.

Introduction

Cyberspace is one of the most powerful and elusive technological innovations of the twenty-first century. It is powerful in a sense that it holds human attention in remarkable ways and parses the mysteries of the world with incredible precision. It is elusive, in part, because it is so familiar. It is present in the mundane, intimate, technical, and traditional practices that form everyday existence.

In the opening section of this work, I provide an ontological account of cyberspace and draw out its most general structural features in relation to what I call the lifeworld, which is essentially the world you see when you look away from your computer or mobile phone. I eventually conclude that cyberspace has the impish tendency to displace structures of the lifeworld on a fundamental and surprising level.

In Section Two, I analyze how structures of cyberspace come to displace structures of the lifeworld that are less fundamental, but more familiar and intimate. I go on to describe the extent of this displacement as foreground saturation and evaluate its impact on individual users. I then appeal to Henry Thoreau to develop practical solutions to problems that may arise from this condition.

In the third and final section, I draw out the concept of leveling as it is developed by Søren Kierkegaard and demonstrate its connection to the rapid dispersal of information through any given society. From there, I show how cyberspace propagates the process of leveling and leads to existential and moral hazards. To conclude, I offer a possible solution from the promise of technology, as well as from Kierkegaard and Thoreau.

Section One: Cyberspace and the Lifeworld

While cyberspace is relatively new to the human condition, its use has nestled into the calm familiarity of basic habits and modes of human engagement. As such, it has carved out a space within our morning routines, nightly rituals and much of the remaining minutes in between. In this first section, I provide a basic account of the logical underpinnings and mechanical ingenuity that have enabled its emergence. My goal with this description is to demystify the concept and present a clear foundation for the types of engagement cyberspace affords any given user. In what follows, I explore the way in which cyberspace displaces many basic structures of what I call the lifeworld. These structures include experiences of written language, embodied social engagement and the contingencies associated with spatiotemporal breadth. The aim of this section is to articulate what cyberspace is and how it comes to alter the fundamental structures of human experience.

The basic building blocks that hide behind dazzling pixels, crisp audio files and startling haptic effects have their origin in binary logic, which, as the name suggests, divides operations into two distinct categories: presence and absence. Before this basic division found its ultimate home in circuit boards and screens, it served to push back against the contingency of life in its most basic manifestations. If, like me, you have had the simple pleasure of ringing an old school receptionist bell, you are already quite familiar with the basics. The function of the bell hinges on either the presence or absence of pressure and responds with either a sharp ring or silence. On the most basic level, binary logic involves turning specific inputs into desired outputs, and, as such, the stability of any given binary system rests on the structural integrity of its parts and the clear distinction of its various input conditions. While this fundamental system may serve humble ends

like the ringing of a bell or the clicking of a seatbelt, it may also be integrated into a highly complex network of precise functions.

The electrical circuitry pulsing through modern homes is an excellent example of the next order of complexity that binary systems are capable of. In these places, elaborate networks of copper wire are carefully arranged behind layers of paint and panels of sheetrock. Entrance points to these labyrinths take the form of outlets, light switches, USB ports and breaker boards. As with the receptionist bell, we interact with these dispersed elements in binary fashion: a light switch is either up or down, USB ports and outlets are either plugged or vacant, and fuses are either intact or broken. The point here is that all these functions are linked together in a contained system that manipulates the flow of electrons which enter and exit via a primary conduit. Because binary logic lends itself quite easily towards connection and integration within vast systems, it has the capability to swell with complexity. Such complexity is the heart and soul of contemporary computing technology, and while unraveling dense binary networks may quickly lead to a headache, one simply must remember that one is dealing with an elaborate structure of yeses and noes.

Much like the modern home, computer technology tightly controls a flow of electrons to perform a variety of useful functions. As Albert Borgmann points out, in computers "[t]he fundamental device that provides for the transition from structure to matter is the transistor, and for the last four decades the favored stuff to materialize these structures in has been silicon, the second most abundant element on earth."[1] Generally speaking, silicon transistors, with the help of a phosphorus molecule here and a boron molecule there, operate as semiconductors which precisely control the movement of electrons that pass through them. These tiny modules of

[1]Albert Borgmann, "Basic Structures," in *Holding On to Reality: The Nature of Information at the Turn of the Millennium* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 154.

electron management may be thought of as circuits that rely on the presence or absence of positive potential: the circuit remains open and inactive until potential is applied and the circuit is complete, allowing electricity to flow freely. The computer I am using to type these words contains billions of precisely aligned transistors that form an incredible network of dancing electrons.

All in all, computer technology transforms formal mathematical structure into computable physical structure through the manipulation of electrical currents. Modern computers accomplish this Herculean mission by controlling electrical potential across a complex network of transistors that are precisely correlated to a wide range of input to output functions or software. Software maps out a particular array of the transistor matrix and renders patterns of this electrical pulsing into a useful series of operations. Modern computers house many different software programs that may be accessed simultaneously and used to perform complex (or sometimes remarkably simple) tasks. While it is easy to lose oneself in these entangled physical descriptions, the demystifying message is that computer technology is just a messy conglomeration of the presence and absence of electron flow. Or, as David Chalmers puts it, causes and effects:

> I think of computers as Causation Machines. They are flexible devices that can be arranged into arbitrary structures of cause and effect. It is this that makes them such wonderful devices for simulation. Say we have a system we want to simulate. The original system has a causal structure among its parts. When we build a simulation, we replicate that causal structure inside a computer. In a certain sense, the original system is causally mirrored in the computer, at least at a certain level of detail. We have replicated the original system using a Causation Machine.[2]

[2] David Chalmers, "Causal Structures," in *Reality+: Virtual Worlds and the Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Norton and Company, 2022), p. 381.

Modern computers in the form of smartphones, televisions, laptops, and desktops all rely on causal structures that play by binary rules. Cyberspace, or the world that emerges at the interface of the human and the digital, has this basic shape as the texture of its reality.

Whether all of reality shares this foundation is an open question best left to theoretical speculation and high-tech tinkering.[3] The world that I hope to explore comes into focus when the lab coat rests on a hanger and ironclad logic melts into the messiness of the everyday. As such, I will now turn my attention towards how an individual experiences cyberspace and how these experiences contrast with those of the lifeworld. As a quick note, I will use the term "lifeworld" throughout the remainder of this work and while it may feel clunky or awkward, it avoids the conceptual pitfalls that accompany the terms "nature" and "reality." Using the term "nature," while phonetically satisfying, would imply that cyberspace is something supernatural or beyond the confines of natural processes. As has been demonstrated above, this is not the case. On a related note, using the term "reality" would imply that the objects and places encountered in cyberspace are not real. While the human experiences of these elements are, as I will later argue, radically distinct from those of the lifeworld, they should not be considered illusions or elaborate constructs.

The first phenomenological element of cyberspace that I would like to draw attention to is its tendency to render its mechanical churning invisible to the end user. Like the electrical components of a modern house or a receptionist bell, a detailed understanding of the functional backdrop is not required for productive engagement. While I have just laid out the basic units

[3] For an introductory exploration see John Archibald Wheeler, "Information, physics, quantum: the search for links" in *Proceedings of the Third International Symposium on the Foundations of Quantum Mechanics* (Tokyo: Physical Society of Japan, 1990), pp. 354-358.

that render cyberspace possible, the intricacies of the system remain conceptually opaque and mysterious during interaction. As Borgmann describes:

> In such an experience the creative alchemy of difference and the sober clarity of structure seem to coincide. Just as the philosopher's stone would turn base metals into gold, so the silicon chip transmutes vague and fallible reasoning into a perspicuous and reliable operation. Mind becomes matter, information becomes structure.[4]

Here, the distinction between cyberspace and the lifeworld remains blurry: when an individual closes a laptop or puts down a smartphone, they continue to peer into a familiar world of quarks and atoms they do not fully understand but can navigate successfully, nonetheless.

Despite the similarity outlined above, cyberspace has the unique character of stripping away the need for the deep understanding associated with basic operations of the lifeworld. The software programs and internet search functions easily accessed in cyberspace remove much of the messy contingency inherent in tasks such as writing or producing mathematical proofs. Although it has become a rare practice, the physical act of letter writing may serve as an illuminating example. If one wishes to perform this action in the lifeworld, they bring together paper and pen and compose letters with care and working knowledge of spelling and grammar. If, in this scenario, an individual finds they cannot spell a word correctly or compose a grammatically coherent sentence, they are forced to wrestle with the signs sitting in front of them. Here, letter writers develop a working connection with the intricacies of language and come to develop an understanding of its structure. In cyberspace, however, misspelled words or comma splices are conveniently identified, underlined in red and the correct adjustments are suggested or simply auto-filled. The point here is that just like the complex matrix of transistors, once familiar mental operations become hidden, forgotten or otherwise unnecessary.

[4] Borgmann, *Holding On to Reality*, p. 162.

Borgmann generalizes this point as follows: "Technology as a way of taking up with reality has put the power of technological information in the service of radical disbursement. At the limit, virtual reality takes up with the contingency of the world by avoiding it altogether."[5] Like many powerful forces of the world, this digital sword has two edges. The incredible structure of computer technology has the tendency to displace the analog structures humanity has found tedious, boring or time consuming. Unsurprisingly, it is at the level of these burdens that the parasitic nature of cyberspace has become most salient. Computer technology, which was born out of the insistent human desire to calculate, has cracked the mold, and crept into our most intimate relationships with the surrounding world and one another. The advent of social media is a case in point and while much ink has been spilled drawing out its impacts on attention, identity and political radicalization, I would like to focus on how it has displaced genuine interaction with insoluble ambiguity.[6]

According to Borgmann, in the lifeworld "[r]eal ambiguity is resolved through engagement with an existing reality, with the wilderness we are disagreed about, the urban life we are unsure of, or the people we do not understand."[7] Physical immersion in culture requires that individuals constantly temper their beliefs and norms against a social fabric which affirms or corrects their particular mode of being. For example, when an individual walks to the grocery store, the lifeworld guides their steps along the sidewalk, calls out for moments of small talk governed by subtle rules, and commands a particular volume and tone of voice when speaking with the cashier. Strong deviations from this general comportment are met with resistance, and

[5] Borgmann, *Holding On to Reality*, p. 183.

[6] For an excellent philosophical and empirical exploration of social media, see Jaron Lanier, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2018).

[7] Borgmann, *Holding On to Reality*, p. 183.

adherence is met with ease. Thus, by its very structure, the lifeworld transforms ambiguity into perspicuous behavior. However, where the structure of the lifeworld provides force and regularity, the networks in cyberspace afford flexibility and control. While engaged in social media, an individual may populate their digital world with individuals and groups of their choosing and reinvent representations of themselves at their leisure. Such flexibility and control enable a recursive flight from the social burdens of reality itself and leave behind a human condition of scattered ambiguity.

Increasing human engagement in social media is a strong testament to the allure of individual ambiguity as it opens a space for playful reinvention and innumerable flights of fancy. As such, the territory is ripe for empirical investigation and philosophical reflection. Placed into relation with the lifeworld, however, such a mode of being carries the triviality of insatiable fantasy and must inevitably yield to the flesh and blood embodiment resting at the foundation of all human experience. This is an important point about the current entanglement between cyberspace and the lifeworld: cyberspace is indeed secondary—no matter how much time individuals dedicate towards immersion within it. Therefore, when an individual does immerse themselves within cyberspace, their condition may accurately be described as dualistic. That is, the digital environment they are engaged with is characterized by a set of lawful principles that are radically distinct from those governing their physical body. As Chalmers puts it:

> A human user of virtual reality has a virtual body inside the simulation, but the user's brain is outside the virtual world…there will be a virtual-world physics and an entirely separate psychology. Whenever a human being enters a virtual world, there's immediately a sort of dualism—at least, from the perspective of the virtual world.[8]

[8] Chalmers, *Reality+*, p. 255.

When an individual is immersed in cyberspace, they encounter a world that is unbound by the rules and lawful relations that characterize the basic topology of the lifeworld. For the purposes of this paper, in what follows I explore how cyberspace alters the concepts of space, time and objects as they are experienced in cyberspace.

Given that cyberspace is an emergent environment, it is accessed by way of the lifeworld through screens, speakers and, on the near horizon, intricate wearable technology. Typically, when one thinks of engaging the digital, they imagine opening a computer or poking a smartphone to life. While these activities constitute engagement, human interaction with cyberspace may also manifest in subtle and surprising ways. There are many examples where the spaces we inhabit are strange mixtures of the lifeworld and the virtual. Consider a typical morning commute filled with podcasts or music: cyberspace is certainly present, but attention is bifurcated between it and the lifeworld. Further, occasional glances at a GPS or receiving a telephone call may disrupt this balance and bring the digital closer to the foreground of experience. In the same vein, browsing the internet or watching a movie may be disrupted by a barking dog, power disruption or anything sufficiently jarring. These situations are important, and I will return to them in a later section. However, for the purposes of this broad characterization, I focus on experiences of uninterrupted visual engagement.

Beginning with a spatial description, the first thing to notice about cyberspace is its ability to represent an incredible range of visual states relative to the lifeworld. As Borgmann calculates and describes:

> Today's paradigmatic field of possibilities is not circumscribed by six or so octaves and twelve keys, nor is it a magic window of two or four or eight segments. It is more like the standard computer screen of the early nineties that had 640 times 480 pixels. Each pixel could have any one of 256 colors. Thus the screen has $256^{640x480}$ or $1.3x10^{7398}$ different possible states. Given that there are 'only' about $l0^{78}$ protons and neutrons in the entire visible universe, the number of

> possible screen states is unimaginably large. Of course, no one has literal control of the entire range of possibilities, nor is anyone able to tell each from all the others. Still a consideration such as this along with a reminder of the tremendous growth in bandwidth for transmitting, in capacity for storing, and in power for processing information suggests that freedom of choice today is as likely stifling as liberating.[9]

In everyday terms, this means that images taken from the lifeworld may be presented as near perfect visual representations and manipulated across an incredible number of domains in cyberspace. Further, novel images may be created that exceed the limitations of the lifeworld. With this extraordinary range, possible visual experiences in cyberspace may exceed that of the lifeworld, making them enticing, attractive and wide open to playful tinkering and powerful modeling. In the lifeworld, the manipulation of the visual field is limited by range and confined to imprecise methods of augmentation such as squinting and the consumption of psychoactive chemicals.

As many contemporary readers may attest, the visual terrain of cyberspace is vast and flexible. It is home to high resolution images and videos of all sorts—artistic, abstract and representative. Further, when an individual seeks to navigate this environment, they are free from the arduous spatiotemporal concerns that characterize lifeworld exploration. For the sake of argument, suppose that an American individual seeking inspiration would like to gaze into the impenetrable eyes of the Mona Lisa. In the lifeworld, such an act would require purchasing a plane ticket, traveling to Paris, wading through line after line and standing shoulder to shoulder with numerous camera-wielding fellow travelers. Such a venture chews up valuable vacation time and requires the physical traverse of vast oceans and wide continents. Or, the same individual, with a computer at their fingertips, may simply slip into cyberspace, poke at their

[9] Borgmann, *Holding On to Reality*, p. 139.

keyboard and voilà! Davinci's masterpiece is staring back at them in all its magnificent detail. Further, rather than squinting from a distance, the individual may zoom in until nothing but her face is visible. They may study every tantalizing detail at their leisure. In cyberspace, space and time are no longer obstacles to be overcome; they are reduced to mere fractions of a second and the distance spanning a typical web browser.

The near eradication of spatiotemporal constraints which has been realized in cyberspace is a story that extends further into the past than the emergence of semiconductors and motherboards. Technological development in the form of highway systems, automobiles, trains and jets has chipped away at these forces and eased the burden of experiencing them in both daily life and the various frontiers of exploration. As the twentieth century was nearly at its midpoint and the presence of television screens became commonplace in residential homes, Martin Heidegger reflected on this technological trajectory:

> All distances in time and space are shrinking. Places that a person previously reached after weeks and months on the road are now reached by airplane overnight. What a person previously received news of only after years, if at all, is now experienced hourly over the radio in no time. The germination and flourishing of plants that remained concealed through the seasons, film now exhibits publicly in a single minute.…The pinnacle of all such removals of distance is achieved by television, which will soon race through and dominate the entire scaffolding and commotion of commerce.[10]

In the lifeworld, one's home is typically within walking distance from a mailbox; or, when camping, one's tent is carefully placed in relation to cliffs, creeks, and corridors. These relations may be defined in footsteps, leaps or even flying crows. In cyberspace, relations between objects may not be defined in these terms; although elements may be logically grouped, they lack meaningful distance. The promise of cyberspace is an ultimate expression of this technological

[10] Martin Heidegger, "The Point of Reference," in *Bremen and Freiburg Lectures*, trans. Andrew Mitchell (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), p. 3.

pattern as it pulls more elements of daily life into its network of efficiency and ease. Once again, we can see the growing structure of cyberspace displacing structures of the lifeworld on a most fundamental level.

As has been shown, cyberspace may augment and enhance depictions of the lifeworld by mediation through an incredible range of pixels. Further, such mediation strips away the spatiotemporal burdens associated with distance and much of its accompanying contingency. In the lifeworld, these messes of contingency may be recharacterized as context. If the Mona Lisa of the lifeworld is the object of attention, the Louvre, with its unique architecture and sea of patrons, constitutes its context. Encountering objects in the lifeworld involves a churning web of relations which come to frame the object in question and disclose the idiosyncrasies of place and process. Here, boundaries remain fixed, sharply defined, and embedded within an intelligible world. As Borgmann writes, in experiencing great forms of art "[i]nformation comes alive. Reality becomes eloquent. When this happens, a celebration rises to the stature of a landmark in time, something that gives our lives coherence and significance."[11] Conversely, once distant objects in cyberspace arrive in the form of information about correlated things. That is, in cyberspace objects are best characterized as referents or symbols of distant phenomena.

These referents, which range from images of the Mona Lisa to Excel spreadsheets, shed meaningful context when pushed through a digital medium. When an individual peers into a computer screen, they engage a collage of aspects which precisely parse the world into an easily navigated matrix. Intentionality here meets little resistance as the realization of technological information has been outsourced to the power of the computer: digital objects are packaged and delivered as impenetrable coded chunks rendered legible by a hidden network of transistors.

[11] Borgmann, *Holding On to Reality*, p. 228.

Information that has passed through this process presents itself in the form of digital objects that humans interact with via buttons, mouse pads and touch screens. In addition to their outsourced realization, the lawful relations between and within these objects depart from the confines of the lifeworld. If you are reading these pages on a screen, the exact details of their arrival are likely a mystery. Further, they may stand alongside several browser windows arranged side by side or overlaid against one another. If you wish to check my sources, they may be accessed with ease and instantly parsed by keyword functions. You may skip ahead with a swipe or snip out series of words and embed them in any number of domains. These objects pop into existence and glide along with ease—papercuts and fussy staples are relics of the past.

In this section, I have provided a description of what cyberspace is and how it stands in relation to the lifeworld. By appealing to structural accounts of human experience, I have shown that engagement in cyberspace displaces tedious or boring mental activities, such as physically writing a letter. Further, I have examined how this process of displacement continues into experiences of social life and engagement in the meaningful context that constitute the lifeworld. Finally, I have pointed out the flexibility and control associated with objects in cyberspace. In the next section, I further draw out the extent of structural displacement and consider its application to more intimate aspects of the human condition. I then characterize this vast extent as foreground saturation and consider its consequences. In response, I examine possible solutions drawn from Henry David Thoreau.

Section Two: Foreground Saturation and Thoreau

As has been shown, the contrast between cyberspace and the lifeworld is structural and deep. Further, the processes of cyberspace alleviate burdens typically associated with the lifeworld, sometimes negatively so. In this section, I describe one of the existential consequences of being caught between these two worlds in a condition I call foreground saturation. After drawing out this position through a series of examples, I show that it is consistent with Thoreau's account of fellow citizens at the dawn of the industrial revolution. Next, I lay out the relevant solutions Thoreau offers his readers and translate them into a contemporary context. My aim here is to make clear the issues associated with foreground saturation and offer readers practical tools for confronting it. I also hope to show that contemporary existential issues, while agitated by the rise of cyberspace, have been confronted and managed by previous generations.

The growing structure of cyberspace has come to displace many familiar processes and objects that characterize the lifeworld. In doing so, it has smoothed away elements of existence that users find burdensome, unnecessary, or distant. The result of this displacement is a type of engagement that lacks substantial context and leaves users surrounded by a foreground of easily consumable elements. The examples in Section One demonstrate how this takes place and why it may be attractive to many users. Recall that while word processors enable efficient and flexible writing, they do so by removing the need to develop an intricate understanding of grammar. Once more, in cyberspace the Mona Lisa may be examined in minute detail; but traveling to Paris and navigating the Louvre has been removed from the experience of this masterpiece. What these examples fail to capture, however, is the extent of this displacement and its subsequent impact on human existence. By mediating a growing range of experiences through cyberspace, users may lose the rich background context that constitutes everyday life in a condition of

foreground saturation. In what follows, I appeal to aspects of cyberspace many contemporary readers will be familiar with and compare them with the lifeworld processes they have come to encroach upon.

To begin, consider online shopping websites like Amazon or any number of retail outlets that have been forced to catch up with the digital wave. These places offer a wide variety of commodities that span from diapers and books to high profile art and automobiles. The supporting structure of cyberspace has brought all these elements into one place and eliminated the need for venturing outside the confines of one's own home, provided there's a Wi-Fi router nearby. Here, cyberspace has smoothed away the contingencies associated with distance on both a global and local scale. Regarding the former, commodities from across the globe may be acquired with ease. Japanese electronics, French wine and Australian honey are all within relatively equal grasp. On a local level, consumers need not confront the perils of traffic or hollowed-out store shelves, they merely need to point and click. This situation has certainly expanded the scope of trade and ease of purchase, but at what cost?

The value of taking a step back in time and venturing to local markets or small-scale artisan shops is subtle but important. In doing so, individuals start to become less of a consumer and more of a community member. They stand in line with people they may not know, learn about the success or hardship of their respective area and massage the social fabric with their own unique presence. Of course, cyberspace has not wholly swallowed up these practices: shop windows and charming employees have stood the test of time and will likely continue to exist. The danger, however, is that the act of facing up to the realities of community is now subject to personal whim and a shrinking set of demanding circumstances. If, for example, an individual needs a copy of *Walden* to cram together a term paper or pass through moods of melancholy,

they no longer need to head to the local bookstore—they may acquire a free electronic version in a matter of seconds or receive a hard copy at their door in days. Cyberspace has radically expanded the range and efficiency of acquiring commodities, but, by the same token, it has removed the need for rich social engagement and appreciation of place.

Taking things a step further, consider how cyberspace has altered the practice of forming and maintaining relationships with friends and family members. Social media is the obvious target here and I will expand on the more theoretical description given in Section One. For many users, social media facilitates superficial relationships to hundreds, if not thousands, of friends or followers. Further, each of these relationships is housed in identical formats: they have a ubiquitous home page layout, the option to type in the same sized boxes, albums for precious photographs, tidy folders for videos and several places to hang hard-earned ornaments such as likes, shares and the breadth of their network. What was once human life and genuine friendship has taken the shape of data in the midst of cyberspace.

Like the process of shopping outlined above, more concrete relationships are necessary and will almost certainly persist. Many individuals will grow up alongside parents, wake up in the morning to a partner and come to love their colleagues and neighbors. That said, under the looming cloud of cyberspace, these relationships may themselves bend towards fueling online clout and a carefully pruned simulacra of selves. Further, important moments of shared experience found in the lifeworld are captured by photograph or video and used to arouse envy and contribute to idealized digital personae. To make matters worse, the social hierarchy established via social media is on full display all the time. If an individual wants to know their rank, Facebook and Twitter are delighted to show them. Here we see cyberspace commandeering relationships and forcing them into the bright lights of a new public square. In this space, value

and meaning are quantified, analyzed and thrown back at users who come to stare at them first thing in the morning, several times throughout the day and as a last ritual before chasing dreams of the perfect profile.

For a final example, consider the actions of meeting a partner and developing a romantic relationship. Websites and applications like Tinder, Hinge, Bumble, eHarmony and Christian Mingle are all up to the task of facilitating a perfect match. Much like social media, individuals in these spaces create what they take to be idealized profiles and toss them into an arena of fierce digital competition. What they come to encounter in these spaces are other profiles full of fixed aspects and carefully crafted personal advertisements. If both parties agree, the next step is a private chat room where they may express themselves in relatively short bursts of text and the occasional series of yet more photographs. The lucky ones who graduate from this stage, perhaps with many different candidates, arrange meetings and finally get a chance to update their status from “single” to “in a relationship.” Courting rituals that occur in cyberspace open a wide range of potential romantic connections and soften both the pleasant and unpleasant elements of surprise and spontaneity. Effectively, searching for romantic engagement in cyberspace involves turning towards and wading through a list of potential candidates organized by proximity, a short list of interests and a collage of images.

In the arena of romance, cyberspace has sought to minimize feelings of loneliness and insecurity, as well as the unpredictability of place and circumstance. Intimate encounters in the digital realm make room for carefully crafted images and introductory lines as people cruise along searching for a spark of interest. What has been replaced is the delicate details of body movement, the pull of a magical voice and the irresistible tempo of synchronized wit. Further, when connections do come into being, digital devices ensure that anticipation and wonder are

remedied by the availability of constant communication via instant message, phone calls and video chats. To be clear, I am not claiming that romantic relationships that spring out of cyber–facilitated connection are invalid or baseless. My intent is to show that the structures of the lifeworld which are displaced by cyberspace extend far beyond things like tedious calculation or modeling efforts.

Taking these examples and distilling them into a set of norms, we can see that cyberspace removes the need for individuals to connect with their immediate community as simple tasks such as grocery runs or shopping trips occur online—a place where dispersed commodities are nearly equidistant. Next, interactions between friends, family and colleagues are ubiquitously presented alongside large amounts of apparent relationships via social media. Digital representations spill over into lifeworld experience by demanding that users import meaningful moments through the medium to compete, idealize and provoke envy. Finally, searching for romantic partners in cyberspace dampens elements of spontaneity, surprise and uncertainty as potential matches are carefully categorized and communication is constantly available. Combining these into an overall trend, we can say that cyberspace, by way of its tendency to remove contingency and context, hands users a world void of background conditions. By background conditions, I mean things like the long lines at grocery stores, the first lonely months experienced when an individual moves to a new city and the lack of romantic experience that make the concept special in the first place.

A life in cyberspace is a life in the foreground—desires are satiated, processes are expedited and distances are collapsed. To make matters worse, this condition is swelling as cyberspace expands with all the vigor that accompanies untrammeled market territory. There is certainly money to be made in making lives easier and unconstrained, as increasing portals to

cyberspace are being opened by way of tablets, smartphones, and soon, wearable technology. These portals call out to users with greater and greater promises of efficiency and ease as life in the foreground grows saturated to bursting. The cutting away of background conditions, while opening an incredible range of possibilities, leaves contemporary users skimming the surface of engagement without probing its depths. In cyberspace, things like music, movies, books, games and more may be explored in countless domains; but experiences of wonder, ignorance, anticipation and imagination that accompany a receding background are lost.

Among other things, cyberspace contains a near endless supply of entertaining elements that may be accessed and consumed in seconds. Further, such consumption is met with little resistance as algorithms are keen to predict user preference and taste. With the power of Google and YouTube, there is no need to wonder about the sound of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonatas or the allure of Cary Grant's classic smile. SparkNotes and blogs ensure that the famous arguments in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* may be apprehended in an afternoon. There is no need to imagine what it is like to trek through the Bob Marshall Wilderness as Google Earth and numerous video recordings have captured every inch of its magnificent surface. Of course, these aspects of cyberspace are not absolute, and their lifeworld correlates remain largely intact. That said, as processes of the lifeworld are rivaled by the more efficient and flexible processes of cyberspace, the former becomes unnecessary and inefficient by comparison. I am not advocating that individuals do away with cyberspace altogether; rather, I am suggesting that they recognize the meaningful structures of experience it may easily come to replace.

If there is one nineteenth-century thinker who would recognize this condition, it would be Henry David Thoreau. Like many of us, he walked between two radically different worlds and experienced the logic of rapid technological innovation. Through the course of his life, Thoreau

witnessed factory style production, industrialization, and the growing pace of city life. Before making his way to Walden Pond, Thoreau was deeply involved in the pencil industry as it tried to keep up with growing communication demands of the industrial revolution.[12] Being a prolific writer during this period, Thoreau carefully documented what he took to be the existential problems of his day and the possible solutions to these problems. In respect to the former, he writes:

> The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation. What is called resignation is confirmed desperation. From the desperate city you go into the desperate country, and have to console yourself with the bravery of minks and muskrats. A stereotyped but unconscious despair is concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind. There is no play in them, for this comes after work. But it is a characteristic of wisdom not to do desperate things.[13]

If Thoreau were to walk within our homes, offices and university hallways to observe individuals bowing their heads towards smartphones or staring into television screens for hours on end, would he say that humanity has left behind the desperation and despair that marked his century? Or would he look through our occasional laughter and half crooked smiles to see the same old world as before? In response to this situation, Thoreau would not need to deliver a grand speech or waggle his finger in front of tired eyes; he would simply need to hand over a copy of *Walden*.

In writing *Walden* and living out its contents, Thoreau is, in part, responding to the way of life that developed out of technical innovation and the rapid dissemination of information in his day. He witnessed a new world unfolding out of the efficiency and ease which accompanies technological development and widely dispersed communication. Speaking of "modern improvements," he writes:

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[12] Laura Walls, "Making Concord Home," in *Henry David Thoreau: A Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 44-45.

[13] Henry D. Thoreau, "Economy," in *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), p. 7.

> ...there is an illusion about them; there is not always a positive advance. The devil goes on exacting compound interest to the last for his early share and numerous succeeding investments in them. Our inventions are wont to be pretty toys, which distract our attention from serious things. They are but improved means to an unimproved end, an end which it was already but too easy to arrive at; as railroads lead to Boston or New York. We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate. Either is in such a predicament as the man who was earnest to be introduced to a distinguished deaf woman, but when he was presented, and one end of her ear trumpet was put into his hand, had nothing to say. As if the main object were to talk fast and not to talk sensibly.[14]

Thoreau cautions his readers away from blindly engaging in technical innovations and the various distractions they provide. Because of his unique historical position and his caution against the churning tide of technical progress, Thoreau is in an excellent position to provide insight into foreground saturation and how contemporary individuals may respond to it.

Pulling away from the attractions of life in the foreground is difficult and tedious. It requires intentional action and the breaking of mindless habits. To begin, it is necessary to recognize these habits and subject them to critical evaluation. In the following lengthy passage, Thoreau speaks to dissatisfaction with what I have been calling the lifeworld and points to a tendency to fall into routines of illusion:

> Shams and delusions are esteemed for soundest truths, while reality is fabulous. If men would steadily observe realities only, and not allow themselves to be deluded, life, to compare it with such things as we know, would be like a fairy tale and the Arabian Nights' Entertainments. If we respected only what is inevitable and has a right to be, music and poetry would resound along the streets. When we are unhurried and wise, we perceive that only great and worthy things have any permanent and absolute existence—that petty fears and petty pleasures are but the shadow of the reality. This is always exhilarating and sublime. By closing the eyes and slumbering, and consenting to be deceived by shows, men establish and confirm their daily life of routine and habit every where, which still is built on purely illusory foundations.[15]

[14] Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 50.

[15] Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 94.

Here, Thoreau starts by pointing to the splendor of the lifeworld and the sense of profound beauty that may be found in immersion within it. This is a call back to the lifeworld that I will examine shortly. For now, I will explore the connection between the formation of habits and what Thoreau calls illusions and shows, starting with the former.

As I argued in Section One, cyberspace itself is not an illusion. It springs out of a perfectly real process and the elements we encounter are unique objects and processes that demand a particular mode of engagement. The structure of cyberspace does not create illusions so much as it renders the deep structures of the lifeworld unintelligible by displacing them with computing power. The illusion that users experience is one of intelligence and control—they come to think they know structures of grammar, mathematics and the nuance of community by capturing them in the digital and manipulating them with ease. However, the truly ignorant situation becomes salient when technology fails or is surprisingly unavailable. Long division becomes much longer when users realize there is more to do than plugging equations into a smartphone calculator. Further, the act of writing an essay by hand exposes how much they have come to rely upon the ease of autocorrecting software. When individuals take up tasks like going to the farmer's market or standing in line at an event, they may come to realize that cyberspace has displaced our very sense of community and friendship. When it follows them into these places in their pockets or on their wrists, they commonly fill these rare and uncomfortable moments by escaping back into the comforts of the swipe and scroll.

Taking a lesson from Thoreau, individuals hoping to escape foreground saturation should recognize that much engagement in the digital has become a thoughtless habit. Thoreau cautions his readers to be weary of such a comportment, as what has been displaced is a form of engagement that lends meaning and depth to relationships with processes, people and places.

Introducing breaks into engagement, such as venturing into the world without a digital escape portal, renders the structural shifts I have just outlined visible and clear. There is no doubt that such breaks will be uncomfortable as the experience of cyberspace cushions users away from the difficulties of the lifeworld, which is what makes it alluring in the first place. For Thoreau, however, breaking away from unexamined habits is only a small step. He resolves to further this mission by living each moment with strong deliberation, as he did by venturing to Walden Pond: "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived."[16] Asking readers to abandon the growing foreground associated with digital existence altogether, while noble, is far too much—I think even Thoreau would caution against it. However, by taking wholesale breaks from cyberspace, users may come to realize when they turn to it in thoughtless habits or when they do so with deliberation.

In many cases, stepping outside digital habits of consumption will be as boring as it is uncomfortable. Riding the bus, waiting for class, taking lunch breaks and driving long commutes call out for digital delights. It is in these moments that abstinence from use is not even tempered by the frustration of displaced structure. The lifeworld is not so much asserting itself as it is going placid and slack—what we come to confront in these situations is not structural difficulty, but our very own troubled selves. Here, cyberspace provides what Thoreau might call shows; although for him, they took the form of petty gossip, superficial novels and newspapers. This is what he thought of such things:

> Not without a slight shudder at the danger, I often perceive how near I had come to admitting into my mind the details of some trivial affair—the news of the street; and I am astonished to observe how willing men are to lumber their minds with such rubbish—to permit idle rumors and incidents of the most insignificant

[16] Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 88.

> kind to intrude on ground which should be sacred to thought.…I find it so difficult to dispose of the few facts which to me are significant, that I hesitate to burden my attention with those which are insignificant, which only a divine mind could illustrate.[17]

Simply put, shows are habitually used to pass the time and avoid the unpleasant task of self-reflection and the hazy drudgery known as boredom—social media, online games and the likes of YouTube are a clear contemporary analogy. The trouble is, when individuals engage in these entertaining elements of cyberspace, they create a false picture of themselves and the world by pruning their own profiles and scrolling through images that represent a false perfection. They come to forget, or even resent, their own bodies and swallow up waves of information instead of letting imagination and sensuousness amplify the beauty of the lifeworld.

Although engagement in cyberspace is indeed superficial, it caters to compulsion and desire. To an untrained eye, this renders the boring moments of the lifeworld dull in comparison. However, by following Thoreau and cultivating relationships to objects and places in the lifeworld, individuals may come to amplify these moments and reliably cope without a digital crutch. When Thoreau gazes out into his surroundings, he sees scenes set before him ripe for deep exploration:

> This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in Nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet, like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled.[18]

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[17] Henry D. Thoreau, "Life Without Principle," in *Essays*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 361.

[18] Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 128.

And in a similar joyous string of words:

> Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me. I was so distinctly made aware of the presence of something kindred to me, even in scenes which we are accustomed to call wild and dreary, and also that the nearest of blood to me and humanest was not a person nor a villager, that I thought no place could ever be strange to me again.[19]

In the first example, Thoreau takes in the splendor of the lifeworld and loses himself in its sensuous serenity. There is nothing in particular that stands forth and serves to entertain him or pull him away from the breadth of the entire landscape. Rather, he imbues his surroundings with a powerful and rich imagination and allows himself to be carried along by the dramatic moments that he, with the help of some bullfrogs and alders, spins into existence. By way of keen observation and poetic charm, Thoreau can amplify the mundane churning of the world into a work of art, leaving little room for boredom and despair. In the second passage, Thoreau manages loneliness and isolation by engaging with and animating the objects he encounters. When he perceives the world, he establishes a relationship chocked full of meaning and kinship. In both accounts, Thoreau delights in the profundity of the lifeworld and circumvents the need to hand his mind over to the distraction provided by numerous shows of his day.

Returning to our current era, thanks to cyberspace shows are far more numerous and easier to access. Smartphones follow people wherever they go and when they return home they are greeted with computers and televisions. Profuse engagement in these devices contribute to the condition of foreground saturation by filling up many moments that users find boring or uneventful. In these moments, falling into mindless habits of digital consumption is all too easy as the world may seem dull or unbearably mundane. However, by following Thoreau's example,

[19] Thoreau, *Walden*, p. 128.

individuals may come to amplify lifeworld experiences by engaging in imaginative exercises and intentionally avoiding the pull of cheap entertainment provided by cyberspace.

In Section One, I argued that cyberspace displaces structures of the lifeworld in the form of radical disburdenment. In this section, I demonstrated the vast extent of this displacement through a series of contemporary examples and characterized the subsequent existential position as foreground saturation. From there, I showed that Thoreau witnessed and documented a similar position in a faraway century and that his work offers solutions relevant to the current era. By following Thoreau's example of habit recognition, the cultivation of intentional action and the deployment of sensuous imagination, individuals are in a better position to confront foreground saturation. In the following section, I consider the moral implications of cyberspace and the existential phenomenon of “leveling” as it is outlined by Søren Kierkegaard.

Section Three: Leveling and Kierkegaard

In Section Two, I showed the vast extent of structural displacement that cyberspace has introduced into everyday life and developed the concept of foreground saturation. Following my articulation of this phenomenon, I appealed to Henry Thoreau to offer several solutions to its negative impacts. In this section, I narrow my focus to leveling, a particular problem articulated by Thoreau's contemporary, Søren Kierkegaard. As I lay out Kierkegaard's account of leveling, I demonstrate that cyberspace further promotes the tendency of leveling to perniciously impact contemporary society in existential and moral ways. Finally, I briefly summarize Kierkegaard's proposed solution to leveling and conclude with a supplementary solution drawn from Thoreau.

Like Thoreau, Kierkegaard lived in a world of rapid industrial development and a shifting way of life. However, unlike Thoreau, Kierkegaard remained immersed in city life and directed a substantial portion of his work towards an explicit critique of the information space unfolding through technological development. Reflecting on Kierkegaard's published and unpublished contributions to the philosophy of technology, Christopher Barnett writes:

> As a son of the nineteenth century, he came of age during an era of rapid technological progress, not only globally, but also in his native Denmark, where his daily affairs forced him to confront and to use a number of innovative technologies. Moreover, he keenly observed this development, taking time to reflect on it in his published and unpublished writings. Some of these reflections are extemporaneous and inchoate, while others, such as *A Literary Review*, denote profound and sustained attention. In both cases, however, Kierkegaard proved to be a perspicacious commentator on the rise of technology. For that reason, his thinking stands the test of time. Kierkegaard's ideas can be applied to the contemporary milieu of digital information, just as his influence can be detected in subsequent philosophers and theologians of technology.[20]

Tracing the influence of Kierkegaard's work on the philosophy of technology is a task well beyond the scope of this work. That said, by appealing to *Two Ages: A Literary Review,* his most

[20] Christopher Barnett, "Concluding (Untechnological?) Postscript" in *Kierkegaard and the Question Concerning Technology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 157-158.

explicit exploration of the topic, a substantial Kierkegaardian account of cyberspace may be articulated. In what follows, I briefly describe this work, identifying what I take to be the relevant section, explore several existential aspects therein and interpret them in light of cyberspace.

Wrapped up in an extended commentary on a contemporary novel, Kierkegaard's *Two Ages: A Literary Review* takes up very little shelf space and is neatly situated outside his notorious motley crew of pseudonyms. Written in his own voice and under his own name, the text begins with a close reading of Thomasine Gyllembourg's novel *Two Ages* and ends with a section titled "Conclusions from a Consideration of the Two Ages." This last section is further divided into "The Age of Revolution" and "The Present Age." Using the former as a backdrop, it is in the latter that Kierkegaard offers a scathing critique of his own society and gives insight into the impact of information technology on his contemporaries. Here, Kierkegaard fleshes out the concept of leveling, describes its impetus and discusses subsequent existential effects that follow. Further, throughout this chapter, Kierkegaard develops what he takes to be the moral consequences of this position.

In his outline of the process of leveling, Kierkegaard begins by describing the present age as one of excessive reflection, writing: "The present age is essentially a *sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence.*"[21] Relative to what Kierkegaard calls a revolutionary age, individuals caught up in the present age find themselves detached from dedicated commitments and stymied in the face of genuine risk. Characterizing this condition as leveling, Kierkegaard goes on to write:

> Leveling is a quiet, mathematical, abstract enterprise that avoids all agitation. Although a flaring, short-lived enthusiasm might in discouragement wish for a

[21] Søren Kierkegaard, "Conclusions from a Consideration of the Two Ages" in *Two Ages*, trans. Edna Hong and Howard Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 68.

> calamity simply in order to have a sense of dynamic life forces, disturbance is of no more assistance to its successor, apathy, than it is to an engineer working with a surveyor's level. If an insurrection at its peak is so like a volcanic explosion that a person cannot hear himself speak, leveling at its peak is like a deathly stillness in which a person can hear himself breathe, a deathly stillness in which nothing can rise up but everything sinks down into it, impotent.[22]

According to Kierkegaard, when individuals experiencing leveling are confronted with waves of inflammatory information, they fail to translate such information into dedicated and sustained action. Rather, in this state, people find themselves paralyzed with apathy as they are pulled into tepid observation.

In order to unpack the concept of leveling outlined above, it is necessary to draw out what Kierkegaard takes to be its root cause. At bottom, leveling describes the relationship between people and information; and, as such, it is bound up with the dispersal and mediation of information throughout society. It should come as no surprise, then, that Kierkegaard points to the public and the press, writing:

> For leveling really to take place, a phantom must first be raised, the spirit of leveling, a monstrous abstraction, an all-encompassing something that is nothing, a mirage—and this phantom is the public. Only in a passionless but reflective age can this phantom develop with the aid of the press, when the press itself becomes a phantom…The public is the actual master of leveling, for when there is approximate leveling, something is doing the leveling, but the public is a monstrous nonentity.[23]

Untangling this description, the public is a collection of people who have sacrificed their individuality for participation in an abstraction. To that very point, Kierkegaard writes: "Composed of someones such as these, of individuals in the moments when they are nobodies, the public is a kind of colossal something, an abstract void and vacuum that is all and nothing."[24]

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[22] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, p. 84.

[23] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, pp. 90-91.

[24] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, p. 93.

Further, for Kierkegaard, the press mediates the relationship between the individual and the public. That is, it serves the dual function of connecting individuals to the public and operating as the mouthpiece for the public.

All in all, leveling is an existential phenomenon that defines how individuals take up and react to information. Under its spell, members of society experience the rumbling of passion, but fail to translate this passion into sustained action. Once more, the effects of leveling may be traced to engagement in the public, which is mediated by the press. Before moving forward and examining the further impacts of leveling, I would like to draw attention to its contemporary manifestation. Noting the compatibility between Kierkegaard's observations and cyberspace, Hubert Dreyfus writes:

> Kierkegaard would surely have seen in the Internet, with its Websites full of anonymous information from all over the world and its interest groups that 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 coffeehouse.[25]

In cyberspace, what Kierkegaard calls the public has broadened to include numerous groups, clubs and forums. Further, admittance to many of these digital domains is often easy and simple. Here, information is more abundant than ever, and the press has expanded to include a near innumerable number of individuals and groups—from the *New York Times* to individual podcasts and blogs.

When immersed in cyberspace, individuals are steeped in clusters of information that have been dispersed away from the particularities of place and circumstance. Here, everything is equidistant and flattened into a ubiquitous format. Therefore, access to information of all sorts is wide open and everything is within equal reach. The body of information within cyberspace

[25] Hubert Dreyfus, "Nihilism on the Information Highway," in *On the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2009), p. 77.

takes the shape of a Kierkegaardian public as it houses an incredible range of, among other things, social, political, educational and interest-related groups. Further, each of these groups may be slipped into or abandoned in a matter of moments. Filling the content of these groups, a Kierkegaardian press crams information into various domains; and as Barnett points out, may rightly be called an abstraction:

> …to say that the press is an abstraction is to say that it is disconnected from actual social relations: there is no flesh and blood person named "The Press" with whom one can converse or to whom one can give something. That is why the views espoused in the press are deceptive. Though they may be attributed to a person, they are not, *sensu strictu*, the views of a concrete individual. The medium of the printed word, disseminated impersonally and vastly, stands between person and person and thereby supersedes face to face interaction. Communication happens, but it is essentially and necessarily a *detached* form of communication.[26]

Kierkegaard witnessed an abstract and detached public arise out of a growing industrialization of a critical technology of his day, namely, the printing press. Cyberspace has extended the scope of this abstraction by mediating increasing forms of information and absorbing increasing elements of the lifeworld into its structure. Finally, becoming a part of the public and contributing to its character have become easy, fast and efficient.

For Kierkegaard, the process of leveling, which is facilitated by information technology, rests at the center of his own age. Going beyond a description of this phenomenon, he carefully outlines its impact on his contemporaries on an individual level: "The individual does not belong to God, to himself, to the beloved, to his art, to his scholarship; no, just as a serf belongs to an estate, so the individual realizes that in every respect he belongs to an abstraction in which reflection subordinates him."[27] In the midst of leveling, individuality dissolves into abstraction and comes to take whatever form is dictated by a faceless public. For its part, the public comes to

[26] Barnett, *Kierkegaard and the Question Concerning Technology,* p. 84.

[27] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages,* p. 85.

shape individual ideals, norms, points of interest and commitments. While this may seem like a harrowing prospect, Kierkegaard keenly points out why it may be an alluring alternative to concrete self-realization: "The public is the fairytale of an age of prudence, leading individuals to fancy themselves greater than kings, but again the public is the cruel abstraction by which individuals will be religiously educated or be destroyed."[28] Wrapped up in the public, an individual, while losing their individuality, may find comfort in the communal warmth of shared opinion or the intoxication of perceived social acceptance.

The public that rises into existence in cyberspace and its subsequent impact on individuality maps on to Kierkegaard's description with astonishing fidelity. Immersed in cyberspace, individual users confront millions of other users and quite literally piece together a representation, or profile, to interface with the digital world. This is a curious situation. On the one hand, individuals lose themselves in true Kierkegaardian abstraction, and, on the other, they produce lasting concretions in the form of profiles. Profiles linger in cyberspace, waiting endlessly for sparks of animation from their lifeworld correlate—serving to populate an incredibly complex public all the while. Through the creation of profiles, self-actualization is parodied in cliches and flashy imagery. In wicked irony, quotes like "to thine own self be true" get tangled with grand images and dispersed like wildfire throughout the digital networks of social media. One might very well ask: "How much tarnished wisdom may fit into 280 characters?" (as that is the upper limit of a twitter profile's voice). Finally, the public that is created out of screens and profiles follows users in their pockets, always ready at hand to whet the social appetite. And, if the lure of proximity fails, the buzzes and beeps known as

[28] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, p. 93.

notifications may spur users into engagement if they have neglected their duty of staying up to date.

As individuals fall into patterns of information consumption in the cyber-facilitated public, their very individuality loosens at the seams and silently drifts away. This process may feel welcoming and supportive, but it leaves behind ghostly husks of genuine expression in the form of profiles. In another eerie prediction bordering on prophecy, Kierkegaard describes the process of assigning significance within a thoroughly leveled public:

> Anyone can see that leveling has its profound importance in the ascendancy of the category "generation" over the category "individuality." Whereas in antiquity the host of individuals existed, so to speak, in order to determine how much the excellent individual was worth, today the coinage standard has been changed so that about so and so many human beings *uniformly* make one individual; thus it is merely a matter of getting the proper number—and then one has significance… Nowadays we understand that so and so many people make one individual, and in all consistency we compute numbers (we call it joining together, but that is a euphemism) in connection with the most trivial things.[29]

Under the shadow of a public, according to Kierkegaard, significance becomes defined in quantifiable terms. The public becomes the arbiter of things like relevance, excellence and prestige. The sea of likes, comments, shares, followers and views that pour out of cyberspace are the mark of popularity and, in turn, perceived worth. Unfortunately, what follows is a sort of tyrannical triviality as truly meaningful content, that which demands careful attention and nuance, is drowned by the glamor of easily consumed information. Here, pithy quotes, photos and videos that merely tickle worn out dopamine receptors reign supreme.

The moral consequences of leveling were profound in Kierkegaard's day and they are indeed profound in the current one. As has been argued, in cyberspace a contemporary Kierkegaardian public has emerged out of a contemporary Kierkegaardian press. As a result, the

[29] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages,* pp. 84-85.

fog of leveling has settled over the age, bringing with it a tendency towards placid reflection and apathetic observation. In our own age, individuality is usurped by participation in an alluring digital public and is codified by the creation of profiles. In addition to housing these profiles, this genre of the public has quantified the significance of content and pushed users towards rampant triviality. There are two closely related moral consequences that follow from this state of affairs: (a) in a swelling information space, moral concretion falls into lifeless abstraction, and (b) the difference between moral significance and moral insignificance is smoothed over. In what follows, I expand on these two consequences, articulate them in terms of cyberspace and point to a solution explicitly developed by Kierkegaard. Finally, to conclude, I consider a solution drawn from Thoreau.

Before I begin, it is an important historical fact that moral action certainly took place when Kierkegaard reflected on the impacts of leveling. Moreover, it is true that moral action does indeed take place in our own age. What I take Kierkegaard to be pointing out is a general tendency among his contemporaries to slacken in response to morally charged information. It is not so much the case that individuals are incapable of action; rather, such action has become rare and relatively impotent. Outlining the moral fortitude of individuals in his own era relative to a passionate one, Kierkegaard writes:

> A passionate, tumultuous age wants to *overthrow everything, set aside everything.* An age that is revolutionary but also reflecting and devoid of passion changes the expression of power into a *dialectical tour de force: it lets everything remain but subtly drains the meaning out of it; rather than culminating in an uprising, it exhausts the inner actuality of relations in a tension of reflection that lets everything remain and yet has transformed the whole of existence into an equivocation that in its facticity is—while entirely privately a dialectical fraud interpolates a secret way* of *reading—that it is not.*[30]

[30] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, p. 78.

For Kierkegaard, in an age characterized by the mass dissemination of information, morally charged reports fail to penetrate the surface and simply fade, grouping themselves with other morally charged reports. The leveled age is so saturated with information that its response is to transform the enormous collection of specific concretions into a manageable set of abstract ideas. Here, individual moral responsibility gets pulled in so many different directions that it ends up staying in the same place.

The parallel between what Kierkegaard is describing and the consumption of information within cyberspace is clear. Scrolling through headline after headline, users are confronted with heaps of tragedy and perilous narratives. Simply put, morally acting upon all the information that may be consumed in an afternoon of dedicated scrolling is impossible. And so, in response, individuals abandon their individuality, hop into their profiles, and grasp at hashtags or photo-filters to indicate they have reflected in such a way that is amenable to the public they are immersed within. To sum up, in cyberspace individuals are presented with so much information that passionate moral response is paralyzed by too many options, all of which are crammed into a handful of small screens. Morally pressing matters get crowded and swallowed up by scraps of information that are just as available and often just as enticing.

Following the leveling process that accompanies the incredible dispersal of information outlined above, individuals are left with an enormous abstraction that carries nothing more than faint blips of moral resonance. Moreover, this abstraction has displaced the specificity and concretion that propelled what Kierkegaard calls the age of passion. As a result, Kierkegaard argues, subsequent moral reflection is characterized by a vague distinction between good and evil:

> The distinction between good and evil is enervated by a loose, supercilious, theoretical acquaintance with evil, by an overbearing shrewdness which knows

> that the good is not appreciated or rewarded in the world—and thus it practically becomes stupidity. No one is carried away to great exploits by the good, no one is rushed into outrageous sin by evil, the one is just as good as the other, and yet for that very reason there is all the more to gossip about, for ambiguity and equivocation are titillating and stimulating and have many more words than are possessed by joy over the good and the loathing of evil.[31]

When morally resonant information is transformed from concretion into abstraction via the process previously outlined, significance and meaning are quantified and determined by the public that has roared into existence. Because moral information has been suffocated and rendered opaque, not to mention disembodied, it fails to shine forth as either noble or unconscionable. Good headlines and bad headlines take on the same shape, and the process of their distinction is outsourced from the individual to the public—good information is adorned with praise, and, even worse, is taken to be good solely on account of such praise.

In addition to accommodating an incredible volume of information, the distanceless structure of cyberspace renders the transition from dedication to distraction easy and attractive. Morally pressing matters stand within equal reach of utterly trivial content. As such, legitimate distinctions across the moral spectrum are faint and watered down by the presence of meaningless commentary and frivolous nonsense. News about distant war, or even acts of terrorism, are punctuated by things like advertisement jingles and status updates. This is often followed by announcements concerning advancements in medicine or climate technology, which quench the moral fire that only had a few moments to spark and kindle. Responses to all these situations take the form of likes, shares and views that become the moral yardstick in digital space.

[31] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, p. 78.

Leveling is a powerful force that emerged alongside the industrialization of the printing press, and, in turn, humanity's ability to widely distribute information. For its part, cyberspace has functioned as a technological surge that carries more information further and faster. It has done so by stepping outside the confines of distance and opening a wide assortment of portals to an incredibly rich information space. As such, cyberspace is ripe for the process of leveling to continue its negative impact on wellbeing and moral integrity. Hinting at a solution, Kierkegaard argues that there is no true escape from leveling, and that individuals must find a way to cope with its consequences. And of course, according to Kierkegaard, such coping is only possible when any given individual submits their will to a higher power, namely, God:

> …all the individuals who are rescued gain the specific gravity of the religious life, gain its essentiality at first hand from God. Then it will be said: "Look, everything is ready; look, the cruelty of abstraction exposes the vanity of the finite in itself; look, the abyss of the infinite is opening up; look, the sharp scythe of leveling permits all, every single one, to leap over the blade-look, God is waiting! Leap, then, into the embrace of God."[32]

I think that Kierkegaard is correct: leveling may not be escaped, only coped with. Though, while his solution is admirable and well supported by many other works in his corpus, a turn towards the divine leaves out a large portion of the human population. For those seeking to cope with leveling in secular fashion, the promise of technology and splendor of the lifeworld may come to ease the burden without such an appeal.

While it is clear that cyberspace may easily facilitate the consuming forces of leveling, it is also home to many great books, previously unimagined channels of education and complex collaborative efforts. In short, cyberspace may be used to further healthy commitments developed within the lifeworld. In the arena of global warming, the dual function of cyberspace

[32] Kierkegaard, *Two Ages*, p. 108.

is quite clear. On the one hand, it levels and transforms the concept into a slippery abstraction that is squabbled over and viewed from a position of detachment. On the other, cyberspace enables the production of climate models, deciphers mathematical equations to unlock sustainable technologies and allows experts to collaborate across barriers of distance. In order to navigate the space between the lifeworld and cyberspace, what is needed is intelligence, restraint and wisdom. Now that we are starting to recognize this vulnerability, humanity can manipulate the pliable rules of cyberspace towards positive ends. Barring a swift technical fix, however, we may turn back to the lessons drawn from Thoreau in Section Two.

When immersed in cyberspace, it is indeed possible for one to notice oneself slipping away from dedication and meaningful engagement into the calm buzz of distraction or banal moral platitudes. Generally, in these moments cyberspace is being used to fill up hours of the day that are unbridled by commitments or just plain boring. It is here that cyberspace transforms from a pragmatic instrument into a leveling form of cheap entertainment; and it is here that Thoreau would catch us in a deeper sleep than when we are snoring into the wee hours of night. In response to this condition, Thoreau encourages readers to wake up and resist the urge of distraction:

> We must learn to reawaken and keep ourselves awake, not by mechanical aids, but by an infinite expectation of the dawn, which does not forsake us in our soundest sleep. I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts. Every man is tasked to make his life, even in its details, worthy of the contemplation of his most elevated and critical hour.[33]

[33] Thoreau, *Walden*, pp. 87-88.

In the lifeworld, there is no shortage of canvas on which individuals may find expression and spin together a heightened quality of perception. This takes maturity, patience and a willingness to deploy imagination. The payoff to this strange sort of effort is a viable method to cope with the leveling process and an opportunity to celebrate the beauty of the world, the beauty of the self and the clarity of moral vision.

In this final section, I have shown that Kierkegaard offers a substantial critique of information technology through his articulation of leveling. Further, I have applied Kierkegaardian leveling to cyberspace as it is currently constituted and demonstrated that it has contributed to its propagation on both an existential and moral level. Finally, I have drawn out the solution provided by Kierkegaard and expanded towards a secular response in the promise of technological flexibility and Thoreauvian imagination.

Conclusion

Through the course of this work, I have demonstrated that cyberspace is radically distinct from the lifeworld and that is has the tendency to displace structures of experience on a fundamental level. Often times such displacement takes the shape of extensive disburdenment and may lead to a condition of foreground saturation. Living in a state of foreground saturation is efficient and easy, but ultimately superficial. I have argued that by appealing to Thoreau, individuals may confront this condition through habit recognition, the cultivation of intentional action and the deployment of sensuous imagination. Finally, I have shown that cyberspace facilitates the process of leveling as it is described by Kierkegaard. I have agreed with Kierkegaard that leveling has profound moral consequences and must be coped with rather than overcome. In addition to summarizing Kierkegaard's strategy for such coping, I contend that the promise of technology and Thoreauvian imagination may also be legitimate forces of withstanding the negative impacts of leveling.

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