

# Kierkegaard's "Mystery Of Unrighteousness" In The Information Age

Brian T. Prosser and Andrew Ward

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## 1

"The world's fundamental misfortune," the 19<sup>th</sup> century Søren Kierkegaard writes, "is ...the fact that with each great discovery ...the human race is enveloped ... in a miasma of thoughts, emotions, moods, even conclusions and intentions, *which are nobody's, which belong to none and yet to all.*" [Kierkegaard (1967), #2650] The great discoveries to which Kierkegaard is referring are made possible by the use of technology, and part of his concern is that the use of technology often results in human beings having "destitute" relations to one another. As exemplified for Kierkegaard by the popular press, the uses of technologies not only transform face-to-face relationships, they create masks behind which people hide from one another. It is this latter point that is especially important. For Kierkegaard, what ultimately drives people toward certain technological practices is fear. "What rules the world," Kierkegaard writes, "is... the fear of humanity. Therefore this fear of being an individual and this proneness to hide under one abstraction or another.... Ultimately an abstraction is related to fantasy, and fantasy becomes an enormous power... [T]he human race became afraid of itself, fosters the fantastic, and then trembles before it." [Kierkegaard (1967), #2166] The use of technology to mediate communication, claims Kierkegaard, provides people with the means to escape, or at least hide from those aspects of interpersonal relationships they most fear.

This tendency to "hide" behind the impersonal masks provided by technologically mediated communication reflects, for Kierkegaard, a flawed attitude regarding what is most essential to veracious communication practices. The attitude is one that he claims characterizes an age "which reckons as wisdom that which is truly the mystery of unrighteousness, viz. that one need not inquire about the communicator, but only about the communication, the objective only". [Kierkegaard (1962a), p.44] Such an approach to the communication process, one that displaces the communicator from his or her place of centrality, undermines an appropriate sense of what it means to participate in such processes. Accordingly, an impersonal means of communication transforms the sense of ownership in the information being exchanged - that is, it transforms our sense of authorship. As Kierkegaard writes:

... in our age what is an author? An author is often only an x, even when his name is signed, something quite impersonal, which addresses itself abstractly, by the aid of printing, to thousands and thousands, while remaining itself unseen and unknown, living a life as hidden, as anonymous, as it is possible for a life to be, in order, presumably, not to reveal the too obvious and striking contradiction between the prodigious means of communication employed and the fact that the author is only a single individual - perhaps also for fear of the control which in practical life must

always be exercised over everyone who wishes to teach others, to see whether his personal existence comports with his communication.... [Kierkegaard (1962a), p.45]

Although the prose may be somewhat oblique, Kierkegaard is making two important, interrelated points. The first is that traditional face-to-face encounters between individuals structure the dynamics of communication in ways that permit the possibility of genuine human relationships. For instance, face-to-face communications often permit the immediate and dynamic clarification of the appropriateness of a particular piece of information. Moreover, the contexts of face-to-face communications generally impose a stronger concern for the veracity of information and instill in the participants a greater sense of responsibility both for *what* is communicated and *how* it is communicated. For Kierkegaard such elements are essential to our most "important" and characteristically human experiences. Kierkegaard's second point is that humans are often fearful of their own individuality as revealed in such exchanges. For this reason people seek to change the dynamics of such exchanges so as to hide that part of themselves they fear to reveal. Thus, a principal motivation for the development of technology is largely negative; the use of technology to mediate communication permits a kind of interaction in which the participants can hide or mask their individuality. It is in this respect that the use of technology to hide or mask individuality represents, for Kierkegaard, a fear of, and an attempt to flee from what it is that is most important and characteristic of our own humanity. As Kierkegaard writes:

The highest triumph of all errors is to acquire an impersonal means of communication and then anonymity.... [A]ll true communication is personal.... But error is always impersonal.... Without the daily press and without anonymity, there is still always consolation that there will be a definite, flesh-and-blood individual person who voices the error.... But it is frightful that someone who is no one (consequently has no responsibility) can set any error into circulation with no thought of responsibility and with the aid of this dreadful disproportional means of communication.... [Kierkegaard (1967), #2152]

Like other writers after him, Kierkegaard sees in technology an inherent tendency to transform human experience. This is an important observation about technology, but it is not one that, by itself, distinguishes Kierkegaard as a critic of technology. What Kierkegaard understands that most other writers do not, or do so only in an unfocused way, is that the impetus to use technology is driven by an ambivalence in human nature. On the one hand we are driven to interact with other people and to find a kind of identity and validation in our interactions with them. It is this aspect of human nature, and the ability of technology to satisfy this desire, that partly accounts for our willingness to embrace technologies such as the Internet. On the other hand, we are also driven to try to control and hide important aspects of ourselves that, in the act of communication, reveals us to others as the individuals we are. Thus, in the use of technology to mediate our communications with one another, what particularly concerns us is that the use of technology permits the reconstruction of human relationships devoid of the experiences most important to our humanity. In this respect, the use of technology is driven by a fear of, and an attempt to escape from the most important aspects of our own humanity as realised through our face-to-face interactions with others. For these reasons Kierkegaard writes that, "[F]rom fear of the others, one dares not to be an I and therefore strives to become an impersonal something.... This again has led to anonymity." [Kierkegaard

(1967), #3219] The dynamic force behind contemporary technology is, for Kierkegaard, fear, which turns the impersonal, anonymity-enhancing powers of technology into an attraction.

It is the possibilities of anonymity permitted by the use of technology that, as Kierkegaard sees it, removes communication from what he refers to as "The Situation". As Kierkegaard writes, "[T]o a discourse, to a word, also belongs a situation during which it appears or is spoken. If the situation is different, one does not say the same thing but something else... even though the [discourse] is the same." [Kierkegaard (1967), #4058] The Situation represents for Kierkegaard that quality of individual existence that distinguishes individuality from the "crowd" or "the public". In "The Situation" you and I have the possibility of having an encounter not as anonymous agents, but as people with distinctive, accessible histories. Because of this, communication within "The Situation" can become individualised - my words can become words meant *for* you and words that you can recognise as being *from* me. When communication is removed from this context, the identity of those communicating becomes a mere abstraction, and words cease to belong to anyone in particular.

Accordingly, the appeal of "desituated" communications contexts correlate to a diminished context within which interpersonal relationships occur. Kierkegaard stresses this when he suggests that "Only when the sense of association in society is no longer strong enough to give life to concrete realities is the Press able to create that abstraction 'the public', consisting of unreal individuals who never are and never can be united in an actual situation or organisation.... The real moment in time and the real situation being simultaneous with real people... that is what helps to sustain the individual. But the existence of a public produces neither a situation nor simultaneity." [Kierkegaard (1962b), pp.60-1] Hence, in an exchange lacking the content distinctive of face-to-face encounters, Kierkegaard goes on to say, "all personal communication and all individuality have disappeared; no one says I *or speaks to a Thou*.... It is the old sophistry of being able to talk - but not of holding a dialogue. For dialogue immediately posits: *Thou and I*, and such questions as require 'yes' and 'no'...." [Kierkegaard (1967), #673] For instance, the words of an e-mail message often arrive either without a context for authentic interpretation, or else within a fabricated context that distorts, masks, or otherwise hides the real identity of the other. In either case, impersonal, technologically-generated contexts become, for Kierkegaard, a "miasma" that offers a convenient escape for those who are unwilling to accept the often challenging, sometimes even distressing, contingencies and expectations that are unavoidable in face-to-face "dialogue" between individuals.

## 2

Where then does all this leave us? We suggest that Kierkegaard is honing in on an important sense in which technologically mediated communications serve up a *measured* reality - a reality that is significantly determined by one's imagination and personal desires. In this respect a Kierkegaardian analysis of technologically mediated communication offers an insightful explanation of why Maia Szalavitz writes in a recent *Newsweek* editorial that "I was immediately hooked by [the Internet...] a world where what you write - not how you look or sound - is who you are. It had definite appeal to someone who has always found socialising difficult." [Szalavitz, 1999] Use of Internet based communication exchanges, such as those offered by e-mail or "chat-rooms", permits the participants to simultaneously mask themselves

and each other. In face-to-face encounters one is revealed because of the uncontrolled immediacy and dynamism of the situation. Moreover, the communicative cues provided by how one looks, how one sounds, one's body language and a variety of other embodied signals provides a context that is doubly revelatory. It presents one as an individual intentionally choosing to communicate a message, while at the same time presenting a message that is not wholly a self-conscious product of one's desires and wishes to be revealed *in a particular way*. It is just here that the true "communicative power" of the Internet and similar kinds of technologies reveals itself. The communicative mediation of the Internet permits the participants to reduce communication contexts to a restricted subset of the qualities that constitute traditional face-to-face encounters. In effect, use of technologies to mediate communication permits the creation of "measured" realities. Furthermore, this ability to withhold from others those parts of ourselves that we may, in some sense, be uncomfortable with while at the same time emphasising only those aspects that most appeal to our own self-perceptions, allows virtual communication to serve up a reality measured according to our imagination and desires. For example, the use of e-mail allows people the opportunity to realise the desire to make of themselves wholly what they want others to believe about them (as, for example, the commentator above wishes to make of herself what she writes "not how [she] looks or sounds"). These "measured realities" are constituent elements of the "miasma" that Kierkegaard describes as built upon "fantastic" abstraction.

It is important to note here that the appeal of technology's measuring effect is not limited to self-perception. There are examples that indicate a tendency to want to reduce *others* to a mere subset of the qualities that constitute our face-to-face experience of them. Sherry Turkle offers a dramatic example in her book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*. Turkle writes:

Peter, a twenty-eight-year-old lecturer in comparative literature, thought he was in love with a MUDding partner who played Beatrice to his Dante (their characters' names). Their relationship was intellectual, emotionally supportive, and erotic. Their virtual sex life was rich and fulfilling ... Peter flew from North Carolina to Oregon to meet the woman behind Beatrice and returned home crushed. "[On the MUD] [said Peter] I saw in her what I wanted to see. Real life gave me too much information." [Turkle (1995), p. 207]

In this anecdote we once again see a measuring and reconfiguration of reality through technological mediation. Computer-mediated communication restricted the nature of this situation to an extent where the protagonist was led to say that "real life" somehow gives "too much information"! In this case, it is significant that real life gives too much information about the other person with whom the protagonist communicates. The idea of an aversion to the "full reality" of other persons is an important aspect of Kierkegaard's concern over our tendency to indulge a potential for measuring reality. It is "[F]rom fear of *the others*," he tells us, that "one dares not to be an I and therefore strives to become an impersonal something...." [Kierkegaard (1967), #3219] But, as this statement suggests, both potential effects of technological mediation - the restriction of one's own self-presentation and the restriction one's perception of another - are connected in important ways.

By the fact that technologically-mediated communication so affects what may be both given and received *of the persons participating in the*

*communication*, the communication situation becomes quite malleable. Of course, perhaps there are communication situations where the kind of malleability described is not problematic. Kierkegaard has expressed his concern in terms of the disappearance of "personal communication" and "individuality". But, not all communications are of a "personal" nature. For example, suppose that all I am interested in is a statement of the facts. I go to the Internet, pick up a phone, or otherwise access an information source about something that may affect me personally - such as the weather or sports scores - but about which it is neither necessary nor important that I have a personal relationship with the source of information. What this points out is that there are limitations on the kinds of communicative exchanges for which the Kierkegaardian critique is relevant. The Kierkegaardian critique ought not lead us to reject all technologically mediated communications, though it certainly should lead us to question the purpose of all such communications and what it is that we expect to realise by their use. What is more, it is conceivable that there are situations where a distorted sociality is the only option and is, consequently, better than no sociality at all. For example, maybe a person with an extreme social-anxiety disorder finds the mediated communication context to be a viable form of social interaction whereas, by contrast, face-to-face encounters are so distressing that the person would tend to avoid social interaction altogether. Such possibilities encourage ambivalence regarding the extent to which information technologies may serve as a social prosthesis, on the one hand, or serve to enable anti-sociality - or at least a distorted sociality - on the other. Kierkegaard's speculations about "the inventions which really please mankind" [see Kierkegaard (1967), #3224] seek to emphasise an all-too-present danger in the latter possibility. It is the tendency toward such distorted sociality, whether by use of technology or by other means, which Kierkegaard has in mind when he talks about a "fear of humanity" that "rules the world." [Kierkegaard (1967), #2166]

### 3

As the variety of information technologies continue to multiply and public access becomes more widespread, the social landscape also changes. Perhaps the greatest changes have been affected by the prevalence of increasingly easy and inexpensive public access to the Internet and its information resources. More and more activities that traditionally relied on face-to-face encounters are being replaced by "virtual" encounters that take place within a computer generated "world". No longer is the personal computer merely a glorified typewriter or adding machine, it is increasingly becoming a "virtual bank", a "virtual shopping centre", a "virtual café", a "virtual auction house" and a "virtual classroom". Moreover, the use of e-mail and other Internet based communication modalities has continued the process begun with the telegraph and telephone; the movement away from time-intensive travel so as to communicate face-to-face in favour of the immediacy of technologically mediated communication amongst geographically distributed participants. As we have seen, Kierkegaard's concern is that we often allow such technological replacement of standard face-to-face activities not because we fail to realise that the number of immediate face-to-face interactions is diminishing, but *because* the reduction is taking place. Recall in this context the case from Szalavitz where the commentator located the appeal of her Internet experience in an ability to escape the embodiment that made her "socialising difficult". We recognise that people often appreciate not having to deal with the "difficulties" that traditional relational contexts require. The cyber-personae we are free to create in the "virtual world" may sometimes seem to "fit" the ideals of our

imagination more comfortably than the bodies we are born into. This raises an important question: Isn't there something "healthy" about learning to deal with the difficulties of face-to-face communication? Questions such as this encourage us to reconsider Kierkegaard's fundamental assumption that there are some experiences - perhaps constituted by, or inherent in traditional face-to-face activities - which simply cannot be captured in and conveyed by technologically mediated communications. As Kierkegaard's "fear of humanity" thesis suggests, perhaps some of our attempts to reach beyond the legitimate framework of such relationships arise not because we are trying to preserve the relationships, but because we are trying to subvert them and escape them. Consequently, Kierkegaard challenges us to question our motives for *wanting* to displace such activities.

In Kierkegaard there is a definite assumption that such transformations of social activity are often motivated by a desire to subordinate individual persons to public opinion - "the crowd". In this regard it is helpful to compare Kierkegaard's concerns with those of Marcuse. For example, consider Marcuse's assessment of "technologized" society as described in passages like the following:

...[T]he existence of an inner dimension distinguished from and even antagonistic to external exigencies - an individual consciousness and an individual unconscious *apart from* public opinion and behaviour... designates the private space in which man may become and remain "himself". Today this private space has been invaded and whittled down by technological reality... The result is, not adjustment but *mimesis*: an immediate identification of the individual with his society and, through it, with society as a whole.... [Marcuse (1964), p.10]

This sounds very much like a description of the faceless public personae, devoid of the particularity of responsible individuals, that Kierkegaard sees increasingly serving as proxy for personal commitment. [Kierkegaard (1962a), p.113] Nonetheless, even though this Marcusean account squares nicely with the superficial contours of a Kierkegaardian analysis, Kierkegaard's suggestion that there is a secret attraction toward this condition that comes *from within* the individual (i.e., the "fear" suggested above) is a significant departure from the Marcusean picture. If Kierkegaard is correct, there is a psychological drive that emanates from within the individual that draws him or her toward the measured realities allowed for by technological mediation. Thus, from the Kierkegaardian point of view, it is insufficient to describe "technological reality" as "invading" the private space that is the individual. Instead, we should see such technological reality encroaching on and changing the individual's interactions with other people more by invitation than by invasion. As such, a Kierkegaardian perspective would also be suspicious of the claim that technologization occurs through the manipulation and indoctrination of the individual by some outside vested interest. The technological society does play an enabling role for the "fearful" individual who chooses to hide behind the fantastic abstractions provided by technology; but from the Kierkegaardian perspective technology *per se* is less deterministic than it seems to be for others who offer similar pictures of "technological reality".

Furthermore, though Marcusean-like concerns over the "whittling down of private space by technological reality" is one aspect of Kierkegaard's consideration, a Kierkegaardian analysis is not limited to this concern. Kierkegaard writes that:

As a matter of fact, the inventions which really please mankind are *either* tinged with the rebellion of the race against God (the tower of Babel, railroads, mass-mindedness) *or*, if they are related to the individual, they are inventions which satisfy his boyishness. Yes, school boys find great sport in being able to say something without the teacher's being able to discover who said it. Boyishness is related to the impersonal, and it is impersonality which pleases man - that is, personally being impersonal, being a person but without any danger or responsibility, being an ill-tempered, malicious person perhaps, venting all one's spite - but anonymously or by ventriloquism. [Kierkegaard (1967), #3224]

Though the technologically mediated contexts we use to revise and restrict our social interactions often serve to subordinate individuality to "mass-mindedness", Kierkegaard also suggests that the same practices often serve to indulge a kind of irresponsible childishness. Such childishness fosters a flippant, sometimes harmful attitude toward the information shared within a particular communication. Hubert Dreyfus has referred to this aspect of Kierkegaard's analysis as a concern over the "cultivation of curiosity" which manifests itself in a "failure to distinguish the important from the trivial...." Dreyfus goes on to warn that "[W]hat Kierkegaard envisaged... is now being realised on the World Wide Web." [Dreyfus (1999)]

Within this context, we want to stress that Kierkegaard describes the same "fear" as underlying both motives - i.e., the tendency toward "mass-mindedness" on the one hand, and "boyishness" on the other. In either case the appeal of technological mediation lies in the ability to extract oneself from the "difficulties" and discomforts that sometimes arise within the open-ended character of face-to-face interaction. One way to relieve oneself of this open-endedness is to replace the face-to-face context with the "measured realities" made possible by "virtual communications". However, at the heart of Kierkegaard's critique of technologically mediated communication is the recognition that "difficulties and discomforts" of face-to-face contexts often constitute the sense of mutual responsibility that are crucial to many social activities.

Without the face-to-face confrontation, self-expression that would otherwise be presumed to reflect one's true personality becomes obscured by the possibilities of "impersonal" media and childish "ventriloquism". As Kierkegaard states the problem, "to discern 'a witness for the truth' his personal mode of existence must be ethically examined in relation to what he says, to see if the personal existence is an expression of what he says - though this is a consideration which the systematising and lecturing tendency and the general want of character in our generation has set aside." [Kierkegaard (1962a), p.130] That is, without the shared context of "The Situation", there is the increased risk of mistaking trivial self-expression for sincere commitment, and mistaking a "merely" manufactured image of oneself or another for the "real" persons that would ground a face-to-face encounter.

If, as people other than Kierkegaard have agreed, technologically-mediated contexts really do foster a more impersonal atmosphere of communication, and if Kierkegaard is right that such impersonality and anonymity diminish important aspects of interpersonal relationships, then we should ask why we increasingly allow technology to transform our world in such ways. Kierkegaard's claim of a psychological attraction toward anonymity and interpersonal isolation - an attraction that comes from *within* the individual - suggests that it is insufficient to describe "technological reality" as "invading"

the private space that is the individual. Anonymity is not something forced upon people by a society's adoption of a particular technology. It is not something forced upon people by the changing economics of information exchange. For Kierkegaard there is always complicity involved in the way we allow ourselves to be transformed by technological society. Technology, even in its negative forms, enters our lives as much by invitation as by invasion and imposition. The importance of this cannot be underestimated. Often claims are made that communication technologies such as those provided by use of the Internet will "draw people out of their shells" and will create communities of vibrant, socially enabled citizens. Following Kierkegaard, what we are suggesting is that such claims rest on an unexamined acceptance of the motivations that lead people to participate in these technologically mediated exchanges. From a Kierkegaardian perspective, the use of technology to facilitate and mediate our interactions with other people plays an enabling role for the "fearful" individual in each of us who chooses to hide behind the facades we created through the use of that technology.

#### 4

In conclusion, in our Kierkegaardian analysis of technologically mediated communications we have drawn on examples where there is an obvious disjunction between the attitudes toward and expectations for social interaction that persons had for their online personae versus their real-world exchanges. But, to go along with examples like Turkle's, where "real life" disappoints relative to images developed online, there are ample instances where online encounters have opened the way for fulfilling face-to-face relationships. [see Baker, A. (1998)] It is important, however, to note that the ultimate criteria for social success or failure is the opportunity to measure the online encounter against the face-to-face encounter. That is, the standard for failure or success was whether life online appropriately corresponds to "real life".

The analysis we offer here does *not* intend to suggest that we should always expect face-to-face interaction to disappoint the efforts of online social practice. What it *does* intend is to emphasise is the importance of face-to-face encounter for determining the validity of the online interaction. This makes the Kierkegaardian challenge to our technological motives striking. Kierkegaard insists on an essential caveat to society's often unbridled enthusiasm for transferring traditional social contexts into a technologically mediated state. This transference often occurs *not* as preparation for eventual face-to-face interaction, but rather as a surrogate for it. Thus, the key measure for the social legitimacy (i.e., the face-to-face comparison) is removed from consideration. Take, for example, the recent proliferation of "distance learning" opportunities through which the traditional classroom may be replaced by a "virtual classroom". [Prosser and Ward, 2000] It is often unclear to what extent these "virtual" learning facilities are intended to *supplement* traditional learning contexts or, by contrast, to *supplant* them. Whereas computer-mediated-communications may serve as a helpful supplementary pedagogical tool, it seems likely to be inferior as a *replacement* for the face-to-face interactions of traditional learning contexts.

In this regard, the Kierkegaardian analysis clears space for certain positive suggestions about how best to approach technology as a social medium. Specifically, as technological capacity makes it easier to supplant (rather than merely supplement) traditional social contexts, it becomes increasingly important that considerations for how to preserve a real face-to-face element in social interaction enter into our strategies of technological use and design.

To this end, we suggest that the following considerations be taken into account when evaluating the use or potential use of technologically mediated communications such as the Internet:

**1. Information Overload** - Like newspapers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, more modern forms of technologically mediated communications such as the Internet permit and encourage the dissemination of increasing amounts of information. This has two results: **(a)** The distinction between what is important and trivial, what is private and public, breaks down; **(b)** The ability of people to discern accurate from inaccurate, veridical accounts from opinions or propaganda breaks down. Both (a) and (b) lead people to take a detached and superficial interest in everything and anything. People take a vicarious interest in the trivial and are willing to pass judgement without any first-hand knowledge. Thus, we need to be mindful of being able to distinguish what is important and what is not, what is truthful and what is not.

**2. Anonymity** - As we have already noted, the use of technologies such as the Internet greatly enhances the opportunities for anonymity. In the case of the Internet, people can often go "on-line" 24 hours a day, 7 days a week and find other on-line personae with whom to exchange information. More importantly, these exchanges can be anonymous with the participants choosing to reveal as much or as little as they want. In this virtual interactive world - what Kierkegaard would call "the Public" [Kierkegaard (1962a), p.54] - anonymity has the tendency of encouraging a lack of seriousness and an erosion of the reasons and desires for responsibility. Thus, we need to carefully reflect on our reasons for engaging in such communications, and not use them as a way of escaping from those qualities that are important to being human beings.

**3. The Personal Element in the Formation of Self-Image** - In connection with (2), Kierkegaard's principal concern is that genuine/authentic communication involves a personal commitment. In such communication a person both reveals and finds his or her own identity. This last is especially important. If the interactions we have with people via technologically mediated communications are "artificial", arbitrary, and unbounded, then the identity one creates in such dialogues is itself artificial, arbitrary and unbounded - in effect, inauthentic. In part, identities and a sense of self are formed by our relations with one another, and to the extent that such relations are shallow and fractured, so too is our emergent sense of self. Thus, as in (2), we need to carefully reflect on our reasons for engaging in such communications, and not use them as a way of escaping from those qualities that are important to being human beings.

Brian T. Prosser  
*Fordham University*

Andrew Ward  
*The Georgia Institute of Technology*

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