Oh God said to Abraham, "Kill me a son"...

Well Abe says, "Where do you want this killin' done?"

God says, "Out on Highway 61."

Well Mack the Finger said to Louie the King

I got forty red white and blue shoe strings

And a thousand telephones that don't ring

Do you know where I can get rid of these things

And Louie the King said let me think for a minute son.

And he said yes I think it can be easily done

Just take everything down to Highway 61.

Now the rovin' gambler he was very bored

He was tryin' to create a next world war

He found a promoter who nearly fell off the floor

He said I never engaged in this kind of thing before

But yes I think it can be very easily done

We'll just put some bleachers out in the sun

And have it on Highway 61.

Bob Dylan, "Highway 61 Revisited"

Kierkegaard on the Information Highway

Hubert L. Dreyfus

Introduction

Like everything else, you can find Kierkegaard on the world wide web. My browser gave me 3000 hits. But would Kierkegaard have been pleased to be on the web? What would he have thought of the latest flowering of information technology?

I propose to translate Kierkegaard's account of the dangers and opportunities of what he called the Present Age into a critique of the Information Age by asking what role information technology might play *either* in promoting a nihilistic leveling of what Kierkegaard called qualitative distinctions *or* in making possible a meaningful world.

I. The Present Age Undermines Commitment and Meaning

In his essay, <u>The Present Age</u>, Kierkegaard claimed that his age was characterized by reflection and curiosity. People took an interest in everything but were not committed to anything. He attributed this growing cultivation of curiosity and the consequent failure to distinguish the important from the trivial to the Press. Its new massive distribution of desituated information, he held, was making every sort of information immediately available to anyone thereby producing an anonymous, detached spectator. He wrote in his Journal: "...here ... are the two most dreadful calamities which really are the principle powers of impersonality--the press and anonymity" (<u>Journals and Papers </u>Vol. 2, p.<u> 480)</u>. Kierkegaard thought that, thanks to these powers, the Press would complete the leveling of qualitative distinctions, distinctions of worthiness, that had been going on in the West since the Enlightenment.

What Kierkegaard envisaged as a consequence of the Press's indiscriminate coverage and dissemination is now fully realized on the World Wide Web. All meaningful differences are, indeed, leveled. Relevance and significance have disappeared. And this is an important part of the attraction of the web. Nothing is too trivial to be included. Nothing is so important that it demands a special place. In his religious writing Kierkegaard criticized the implicit nihilism in the idea that God is equally concerned with the salvation of a sinner and the fall of a sparrow. On the Web, the attraction and the danger is that everyone can take this godlike point of view. One can view a coffee pot in Cambridge, the latest super-nova, look up references in a library in Alexandria, find out what fellowships are available to a person with ones profile, or direct a robot to plant and water a seed in Austria, not to mention plow through thousands of ads, all with equal ease and equal lack of any sense of what is important. The crucial and the absolutely trivial are laid out together on the information highway in just the way Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, red-white and blue shoe strings, 1000 telephones that don't ring, and the next world war are laid out on Dylan's nihilistic Highway 6l.

This leveling of differences is reflected in the way information is organized on the Web. When information is organized in a hierarchical database, the user is forced to commit to a certain class of information before he can view more specific data that fall under that class. For example, I have to commit to an interest in animals before I can find out what I want to know about tortoises; and once having made that commitment to the animal line in the data base, I can't then examine the data on problems of infinite without backtracking through the commitments I have made.

When information is organized in hypertext, as it is on the Web, however, instead of the privileged relations between a class and its members, the organizing principle is the interconnectedness of all knowledge. The goal of hypertext is to allow the user easily to get from one data entry to any other, as long as they are related in at least some tenuous fashion. So, for instance, in examining the entry on tortoises, I might click on the bold text that reads "Tortoises -- compared to hares," and be transported instantly to an entry on Zeno's paradox.

LIBRARY CULTURE	INFORMATION-RETRIEVAL CULTURE

Careful selection
 	
    a. quality of editions
 	
    b. authenticity of the text
	Access to everything
	
	    a. inclusiveness of editions
	
	    b. availability of texts

Classification
 	
    a. disciplinary standards
 	
    b. stable, heirarchically organized, defined by specific interests.
	Diversification
	
	    a. user friendliness
	
	    b. hypertext—following all lines of association

Permanent collections
 	
a. preservation of a fixed text
 	
b. interested browsing
	Dynamic collections
	
	    a. intertextual evolution
	
	    b. playful surfing

In this way the user is encouraged to traverse a vast network of knowledge and information, all of which is equally accessible and therefore none of which is privileged. Everything is linked to everything else on a single level. Moreover, the links are not based on a developing sense of relevance but on the canned, context-free relevance of key words. *Quantity* of connections has replaced any judgment as to the *quality* of those connections.

One can see this new way of organizing information in a contrast suggested by Terry Winograd between the old library culture and the new kind of libraries made possible by information technology. The oppositions show the transformation of a former meaning-driven structure into a nihilistic, leveling structure along the lines that Kierkegaard feared. Here is my systematization of a few of the oppositions that Winograd has observed:

Clearly, the user is no longer a subject who desires a more complete and reliable model of the world, but a protean being ready to be opened up to ever new horizons. In short, the new human being is not interested in *collecting what is significant* but in *connecting to as wide a web of information as possible*.

For such a postmodern being the more information the better, since information enables one to learn more and more and to look at things from all sides. But the accumulation of information postpones decision indefinitely since, as one finds out more, it is always possible that one's picture of the world and, therefore, of what one should do may have to be revised. One never has enough information. Thus one can never act.. All that a reflective age lie ours produces is more an more knowledge. As Kierkegaard saw, "by comparison with a passionate age, an age without passion gains in *scope what it loses in intensity*" (Present Age, p. 68, italics Kierkegaard's). He adds: "We all know ...the different ways we can go, but nobody is willing to move" (The Present Age, p. 77).

It is no accident that what Kierkegaard attacks as the Press, he also calls *the Public*. Around 1850 the new power of the Press to disseminate information to everyone in a nation lead its readers to transcend their local, personal involvement and overcome their reticence about what did not directly concern them. The Press encouraged everyone to develop an opinion about everything. This was seen by many as a triumph of democratization. Jürgen Habermas praises the new importance of non-parochial interest as the development of The Public Sphere. We now speak of public opinion. Coffee houses as well as The Press became the locus of a new form of political discussion. This new sphere of discourse is radically different from the ancient polis or republic; the modern public sphere understands itself as being outside power. This extra-political status is not just defined negatively, as a lack of power, but seen positively. Just because public opinion is not an exercise of power, it is protected from any partisan spirit. Enlightenment intellectuals saw the Public Sphere as a space in which the rational, disinterested reflection that should guide government could be institutionalized and refined. Such disengaged discussion came to be seen as an essential feature of a free society. As Burke put it, "in a free country, every man thinks he has a concern in all public matters."

Kierkegaard saw matters entirely differently. That the Public Sphere lies outside of power meant that in it one could hold an opinion without having to act on it. This opens up the possibility of endless reflection. If there is no possibility of decision and action, one can look at all things from all sides and always find some new perspective from which to put everything into question again. But, Kierkegaard saw, when everything be up for endless

critical commentary, action finally becomes impossible. The public sphere becomes a realm of idle talk in which one merely passes the word along.

If all the public can do is observe and reflect, then by being part of the public one can be secure while at the same time having opinions on everything. Kierkegaard already saw that the essential feature of this freedom to have an opinion on everything is that people do not take responsibility for their opinion. The Press speaks for the Public but no one stands behind the views the public holds. As Kierkegaard put it, "In order that everything should be reduced to the same level, it is first of all necessary to procure a phantom, its spirit, a monstrous abstraction, and all-embracing something which is nothing, a mirage-- and that phantom is the public"(PA p. 59)

Thus, the Public Sphere's being outside power, that seems a virtue to detached Enlightenment reason, looks to Kierkegaard like a disastrous drawback. The Public Sphere is a world in which everyone comments on and has an opinion on all public matters without needing to act and therefore without have to make any commitment. "A public is neither a nation, nor a generation, nor a community, nor a society, nor these particular men, for all these are only what they are through the concrete; no single person who belong to the public makes a real commitment.", he said.(PA 63) The motto he suggested for the Press was: "Here men are demoralized in the shortest possible time on the largest possible scale, at the cheapest possible price." (Journals, Vol. 2, p. 489)

Kierkegaard would no doubt have been happy to transfer this same motto to the Web, for just as no individual assumes responsibility for the consequences of the information in the Press, no one assumes responsibility for even the accuracy the information on the Web. Of course, in so far as one does not take action on the information, no one really cares if it is reliable. All that matters is that everyone pass the word along by forwarding it to other users. the information has become so anonymous that no one knows or cares where it came from anyway. Moreover, in the name of protecting privacy, ID codes are being developed that will assure that even the senders address will be secrete. The net is thus a perfect medium for slander and innuendo. Kierkegaard could have been speaking of the Internet when he said of the Press: "It is frightful that someone who is no one ... can set any error into circulation with no thought of responsibility and with the aid of this dreadful disproportioned means of communication" (Journals and Papers, Vol 2, p 481.)

Kierkegaard would surely see in the net with its interest groups which anyone in the world can join and where one can discuss any topic endlessly without consequences the hi-tech synthesis of the worst features of the newspaper and the coffee house. Without rootedness in particular problems all that remains for the interest group commentator is endless gossip. In such groups anyone can have an opinion on anything and all are only too eager to respond to the equally deracinated opinions of other anonymous amateurs who post their views from nowhere. Such commentators do not take a stand on the issues they speak about. Indeed, the very ubiquity of the net makes any such local stand seem irrelevant.

What is striking about such interest groups is that no experience or skill is required to enter the conversation. Indeed, the most serious danger of the Public Sphere, as illustrated on the World Wide Web, may well be that it undermines expertise. Learning a skill requires interpreting the situation as being of a sort that requires a certain action, taking that action, and learning from one's success or failure. Studies of skill acquisition have shown that, unless the outcome matters and unless the person developing the skill is willing to accept the pain

that comes from failure and the elation that comes with success, the learner will be stuck at the level of competence and never achieve mastery. Since expertise can only be acquired through involved engagement with actual situations, what is lost in disengaged discussion is precisely the conditions for acquiring mastery or practical wisdom.

Thus Kierkegaard had a prescient and frightening view of information technology. He thought that "Europe will come to a standstill at the press and remain at a standstill as a reminder that the human race has invented something which will eventually overpowered it." (Journals, Vol. 2, p. 483.) He already saw that the ultimate activity the Internet would encourage would be speculation on how big it is, how much bigger it will get, and what, if anything, all this means for our culture. This sort of discussion is, of course, in danger of becoming part of the very cloud of anonymous speculation Kierkegaard abhorred. (I'm told this very talk will soon be available on the net.) Indeed, Kierkegaard concluded his analysis of the dangers of the present age and his dark predictions of what was ahead for Europe with the ironic remark that: "In our times, when so little is done, an extraordinary number of prophecies, apocalypses, glances at and studies of the future appear, and there is nothing to do but to join in and be one with the rest" (The Present Age p. 85).

The only alternative Kierkegaard saw to this paralyzing self-scrutiny was to plunge into to some kind of activity -- any activity -- as long as one threw oneself into it with passionate involvement. Towards the end of The Present Age he exhorts his contemporaries to make such a leap:

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

II. The Aesthetic Sphere: Commitment to Endless Possibilities

Such a light hearted leap into the deeper water is typified by the net-surfer for whom information gathering has become a way of life. Such a surfer is curious about everything and ready to spend every free moment visiting the latest hot spots on the web. He or she enjoys the sheer range of possibilities. Something interesting is only a click away. Commitment to information as a boundless source of enjoyment puts one in what Kierkegaard calls *the aesthetic sphere of existence* -- his anticipation of postmodernity. For such a person just visiting as many sites as possible and keeping up on the cool ones is an end in itself. The only meaningful distinction is between those sites that are interesting and those that are boring. Life consists in fighting off boredom by being a spectator at everything interesting in the universe and in communicating with everyone else so inclined. Such a life produces a self that has no defining content or continuity but is open to all possibilities and to constantly taking on new roles.

But we have still to explain what makes this use of the Web attractive. Why is there a thrill in being able to find out about everything no matter how trivial? What motivates a commitment to curiosity? Kiekegaard thought that in the last analysis people were attracted to the Press, and we can now add the Web, because the anonymous spectator *takes no risks*. The person in the aesthetic sphere keeps open all possibilities and has no fixed identity that could be threatened by disappointment, humiliation or loss. Surfing the Web is ideally suited to such a life. On the Internet commitments are at best virtual commitments.

Sherry Turkle has usefully described how the Net is changing the background practices that determine what kinds of selves we can be. In *Life on the Screen,* she details "the ability of the Internet to change popular understandings of identity." On the Internet "we are encouraged to think of ourselves as fluid, emergent, decentralized, multiplicious, flexible, and ever in process," she tells us. Thus "the Internet has become a significant social laboratory for experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that characterize postmodern life."

Turkle's interviews, however, show something more complicated than that we are simply living in postmodernity. Her work unintentionally reveals that we are in transition in the way we understand ourselves. Turkle speaks of "using virtual spaces to construct identity," but the idea that we construct our identity is not new. As Turkle notes, it goes back at least to Shakespeare. The crucial question is, What sort of identity does the Net encourage us to construct? There seem to be two answers--an ethical and an aesthetic one-- which Turkle does not clearly distinguish. On the one hand, the Net can be used for serious self exploration and articulation. As she notes, "On a MUD [Multi-User Dungeon] one actually gets to build character and environment and then to live within the toy situation. A MUD can become a context for discovering who one is and wishes to be." Thus some players are exploring themselves in various roles to find the role for them in order to become more clearly and confidently themselves. The Net then functions, as Turkle says, "to facilitate self knowledge and personal growth."

Kierkegaard calls this search for a serious role the *ethical* sphere and sees it as the very opposite of the attempt to keep open all possibilities that he thinks is definitive of the *aesthetic* sphere. So, as one might expect, while Turkle continues to use the old, modernist language of personal growth, she, nonetheless, sees that the computer and the Internet promote something totally different.

> MUDs make possible the creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion. Identity, after all, refers to the sameness between two qualities, in this case between a person and his or her persona. But in MUDs, one can be many.

MUDs lend themselves, then, especially to the possibility of playing at being many selves, none of whom is recognized as who one truly is, and this possibility is not just theoretical but actually introduces new social practices.

> The rethinking of human ... identity is not taking place just among philosophers but "on the ground," through a philosophy in everyday life that is in some measure both proved and carried by the computer presence.

Turkel realizes that the Net encourages what she calls "experimentation" (a confusing term covering both exploration and morphing) because what one does on the Net has no consequences. She thinks this frees people to develop new and exciting selves. The person in the aesthetic sphere of existence would surely agree, but according to Kierkegaard: "As a result of knowing and being everything possible, one is in contradiction with oneself" (<u>Present Age</u> p.68). When he is speaking from the point of view of the next higher sphere of existence, Kierkegaard tells us that the self requires not "variableness and brilliancy" but "firmness, balance. and steadiness" (<u>Either/Or</u> Vol. II pp 16,17).

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

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

III. The Ethical Sphere: Making Concrete Commitments

That higher form of life Kierkegaard calls *the ethical sphere*. In it one has a stable identity and one is committed to involved action. Information is not denigrated but is sought and used for serious purposes. As long as information gathering is not an end it itself, whatever reliable information there is on the Web can be a valuable resource.

Applied to the question of information, this means that the use of information must be subordinated to making and keeping track of serious commitments. And serious commitments require that people have life plans and take up serious tasks. They then have goals which determine what needs to be done and what information is relevant for doing it. Can information technology support this life of committed action.

If information technology could reveal and support the making and maintaining of commitments for action, it would support, not undermine, the engaged activity Kierkegaard claims human beings need. Indeed, we are now entering a second stage of information technology where it is becoming clear how the ethical sphere can be implemented by using computers to keep track of commitments in order to further the coordination of action. Over the past fifteen years or so, one of my students, Fernando Flores, and his colleagues have argued that computers could play an important role in coordinating action because there are a set of fundamental stable structures of operational coordination. When people communicate, they do not simply pass information back and forth: they get things done. In their activity they

depend on speech acts such as requesting and promising to make commitments. Moreover, not only do such speech acts as requests and promises enable them to operate successfully *within* a shared world; other speech acts such as offers and declarations *open up new worlds* -- domains of discourse and action such as industries, governments, professions and so forth. So far as information technology develops means of communication that enable people to keep track of their commitments and to see how their speech acts open new domains of action, information technology supports the ethical sphere.

But Kierkegaard would no doubt hold that, when the use of information technology for the coordination of commitments was successfully instantiated in a communications system, the very ease of making commitments would ultimately further the inevitable breakdown of the ethical sphere. Each commitment we make has an enormous number of consequences, and we are solicited to take active responsibility for all the consequences that we recognize. So the more sensitive we are to commitments, the more conflicting solicitations we will encounter. And the more we decide a conflict by making one or another commitment, the more our commitments will proliferate into conflicts again. Thus the more developed a system for keeping track of commitments is, the more information and possible commitments it will keep track of, and its very ability to keep track of all commitments, which should have supported action, will lead instead to paralysis

To avoid arbitrary choice, one might, like Judge William, Kierkegaard's pseudonymous author of the description of the ethical sphere in Either/Or, turn to one's talents and one's job description to limit one's commitments. Judge William says that his range of possible relevant actions are constrained by his social roles as judge and husband. But Judge William admits, indeed he is proud of the fact, that as an autonomous person he is free to give whatever meaning he decides to his talents and his roles. Likewise, one of the things one can do with speech acts is change roles or open up new ones, so one's freedom is not constrained by ones given station and its duties.

The ethical person responds to this breakdown by trying to choose which roles and therefore which commitments are the most important ones. This choice is based on a more fundamental choice of what is worthy and not worthy, what good and what evil. As Judge William puts it:

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

But, Kierkegaard argues, if everything is up for choice, including the standards on the basis of which one chooses, there is no reason to choose one set of standards rather than another. Choosing the guidelines for ones life never makes any serious difference since one can always choose to rescind one's previous choice. The ethical breaks down because the power to make commitments undermines itself. Any commitment I make does not get a grip on me because it can always be revoked. It must be constantly reconfirmed by a new commitment to take the previous one seriously. As Kierkegaard puts it:

> If the despairing self is *active,* ... it is constantly relating to itself only experimentally, no matter what it undertakes, however

great, however amazing and with whatever perseverance. It recognizes no power over itself; therefore in the final instance it lacks seriousness...The despairing self is content with taking notice of itself which is meant to bestow infinite interest and significance on its enterprises, and which is exactly what makes them experiments. .. The self can , at any moment, start quite arbitrarily all over again and, however far an idea is pursued n practice, the entire action is contained within an hypothesis (<u>Sickness unto Death,</u> p. 100).

Thus the *choice* of meaningful differences that was supposed to support action thwarts it, and one ends up in what Kierkegaard calls the despair of the ethical. Kierkegaard concludes that one can not stop the proliferation of information and commitments by *deciding* what is worth doing; one can only do that by having an individual identity and thereby opening an individual world.

IV. The Religious Sphere: Making One Unconditional Commitment

The view of commitments as open to being revoked does not seem to hold for those commitments that are most important. These special commitments are neither the ones that I negotiate with others nor the ones that I am obliged to keep because of my social role. Rather, these special commitments are experienced as grabbing my whole being. When I respond to such a summons by making an *unconditional* commitment, this commitment determines what will be the significant issue for me for the rest of my life. Political and religious movements can grab us in this way as can love relationships and, for certain people, such vocations as the law or music.

These unconditional commitments are different from the normal sorts of commitments. They define the world in which our everyday commitments are made and even what sorts of new domains are worth opening up. They determine what counts as worthwhile by determining who we are. Identities based on unconditional commitments, then, stop the proliferation of everyday commitments by determining what ultimately matters. They thus block nihilism by establishing qualitative distinctions between what is important and trivial, relevant and irrelevant, serious and playful.

But, of course, such a commitment is risky. One's cause may fail. One's lover may leave. The curiosity of the Present Age, the flexibility of the aesthetic sphere and the unbounded freedom of the ethical sphere are all ways of avoiding risk, but it turns out, Kierkegaard claims that for that very reason they level all qualitative distinctions and end in the despair of meaningless.

Once one has an unconditional commitment, one can see that everyday commitments alone cannot be the basis for involved action. Everyday commitments make sense and can be seen as relevant only within an overall sense of what ultimately matters. Just as making offers, requests, promises and declarations is more fundamental than information because it sets up the terms for using information, so forming identities is more fundamental than making commitments, because it determines which commitments matter and why.

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

Kierkegaard would surely argue that, while the Internet allows unconditional commitments, it does not support them. Far from encouraging them, it tends to turn all of life into a risk free game. So, in the end, although it does not prohibit such commitments, it does inhibit them. Like a simulator it manages to capture everything but the risk. Our imaginations can be drawn in, as they are in playing games and watching movies. And no doubt game simulations sharpen our responses for non-game situations. But so far as games work by capturing our imaginations, they will fail to give us serious commitments. We read dense texts or practice a difficult piece of music day after day because they matter greatly to us. But we are unlikely to stay with either for long when we have only an imaginary ultimate commitment. Imagined commitments hold when our imaginations are captivated by the simulations before our ears and eyes. And that is what computer games and the Net offer us. The temptation is to live in a world of stimulating images and simulated commitment and thus to lead a simulated life. The test as to whether one had acquired an unconditional commitment would come if one had the incentive and courage to transfer what one had learned to the real world. Then one would confront what Kierkegaard called "the danger and the harsh judgment of existence". And precisely the attraction of the Net would inhibit that final plunge. Anyone using the net who was led to risk his or her real identity in the real world would thus have to act against the grain of what attracted them to the Net in the first place.

If Kierkegaard is right, and the cyber-world is to avoid despair, it will have to find a way of canceling this risk-free attraction and thereby support and encourage strong identities in the real world where risk of failure and disappointment is inevitable.