University of Dundee

School of Humanities, Social Sciences and Law
Division of Humanities

Coversheet

Question Number & Title:

"Writing in the late 1990s, and building on Kierkegaard, Hubert Dreyfus arrives at a position whereby '[what] online engagements intrinsically lack is exposure to risk, and without risk there can be no true meaning or commitment found in the electronic domain'. [1] How well does this thesis apply to a comparative case study of X and Instagram?"

Reflections on Feedback Box

Please put some brief lines about your assessment. E.g.

- What would you say you have done well here?
- What have you done differently as a result of previous feedback?
- Which rubric area do you think needs improvement?

Date: 21/03/24

Word Count: 2278

[1] Shannon Valor, 'Social Networking and Ethics', *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.) <Social Networking and Ethics (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy)> [accessed 07/03/2024] (2.2 para 1)

Remember marking is **anonymous**, do not put your name here or in filename.

In the 21st century, new media technologies for social networking, such as X and Instagram, have transformed social, political, and individual practices across the world. Hubert Dreyfus published an article predicting the ethical risks of technology, 'Anonymity versus Commitment: The Dangers of Education on the Internet' where he concludes that no true meaning or commitment can arise within the electric domain, due to the lack of risk it poses individuals. At the time of publication, Google had only existed for three years, 'social media' was a meaningless term, and the first iPhone would not be launched for another six years. 'The Internet' in 1999 was merely a network of desktop computers, not a world dominated by mobile computing.[2] Since Dreyfus's publication, the world of technology has transformed, yet his key argument still rings true that what 'online engagements intrinsically lack is exposure to risk, and without risk, there can be no true meaning or commitment found in the electronic domain'. By integrating Dreyfus's theory, in which he builds upon key concepts from Kierkegaard's 'The Present Age' I intend to assess the dangers the lack of risk, within social networking services, (SNS) poses on the individual, and why we must look elsewhere when forming meaningful commitments.

I will argue that Kierkegaard's description of his present age is a plausible and illuminating one in the context of our present age, concerning social media usage. Kierkegaard states that, "the present age is a sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence."[3] By juxtaposing the age of revolution, which Kierkegaard proposes as an age which acted, with the passionless present age, key comparisons can be noted between the two in order to make sense of our present age, which is dominated by passionless SNS. For example, 'passion' is an essential term throughout, being passionate about something requires great interest and care, yet Kierkegaard claims that we live in an age completely devoid of passion. This is perhaps due to the sensible, reflective nature of our age, where there is a complete lack of action or desire. To apply this notion of the passionless to our present age, would be to compare it to the virtual realm we have created for ourselves, where we passionlessly present an alienated version of ourselves on X and Instagram to other users, allowing us to maintain a distance between our true identities and what we allow other people to see. Presenting an alienated version of the self-disconnects us from reality and plunges us deeper into the virtual realm; therefore, distancing ourselves from opportunities to find

[2] Dominic Smith, 'Existentialism and Technology' in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Existentialism*, ed. by Jack Reynolds, et al., (London: 2024). p.241

[3] Kierkegaard, Soren, Howard V. Hong, and Edna H. Hong, 'Two Ages the Age of Revolution and the Present Age: A Literary Review' (Princeton University Press, 2009), Kierkegaard's writings p.68

passion outside the digital world of SNS, which can be compared with Kierkegaard's account of the public sphere.

Kierkegaard's concept of levelling is vital in the context of modern social media usage, its intertwinement with the public can be translated, in our present age, to the overuse of social media. Levelling, which is an abstraction of the public, is when you are seen as an alienated version of yourself, it is the suppression of individuality to a point where the individual's uniqueness becomes non-existent and nothing meaningful in their existence can be affirmed. Kierkegaard states:

> "For levelling really to take place, a phantom must first be raised, the spirit of levelling, a monstrous abstraction, an **all-encompassing something that is nothing**, a mirage-and this **phantom is the public**."[4]

The connection between levelling and the public is vital, within the public one becomes a mere representation of a type and all socialized people become interchangeable. In our present age, the public takes the form of X and Instagram, on these platforms there is an overload of information where there is no way to distinguish the 'relevant from the irrelevant and the significant from the insignificant, everything becomes equally interesting and equally boring'[5]. Kierkegaard would define the nature of X as chatter, which 'gets ahead of essential speaking, and giving utterance to reflection has a weakening effect on action by getting ahead of it.'[6] Chattering is one of the most fitting examples to draw from The Present Age and apply to our present age, because X and Instagram are dominated by irrelevant chatter. Chatter gets ahead of real conversation, it weakens action, so now when people attempt to have important discussions through X and Instagram, they are washed out by chatter. This irresponsible chatter contributes to the lack of risk on social media, thus preventing commitment, because there is little importance or passion injected in our opinions on SNS, it is simply a distraction from the real world.

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[4] *Ibid.,* p.90.

[5] Dreyfus, Hubert L., "Anonymity versus Commitment: The Dangers of Education on the Internet," *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 34.4 (2002), p.641-646 (p.643)

[6] *Ibid.,* p.97.

Instagram and X allow us to play with notions of identity, commitment and meaning, without risking the irrevocable consequences that ground real identities and relationships.[7] Dreyfus poses it this way:

> "…the **anonymous spectator takes no risks**. The person in the aesthetic sphere keeps all possibilities open 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 and losses only virtual losses"[8]

As previously discussed, when Dreyfus published this essay, what he had in mind in terms of 'the internet', was not the current world wrought by ubiquitous and mobile computing.[9] However his claim is still extremely relevant today, the nature of Instagram specifically allows individuals to play with notions of their identity. In an interview with The Guardian, Tech reporter Sarah Frier, author of 'No Filter: The Inside Story of How Instagram Transformed Business, Celebrity and Our Culture' discusses the pursuit of perfection on Instagram, the need to be seen as an idealised and falsified version of the self. Frier speaks on how it's CEO, Mark Zuckerberg demands quality in an imperfect world, which has shifted our reality; "a filter on Instagram was like if Twitter (Now X) had a button to make you cleverer".[10] The rise of 'filters' on Instagram validates the lack of risk found within the network, ironically, in a literal sense, we filter our posts to present something other than reality, but Instagram achieves this anyway, even without filters. The conception of 'filters' can be viewed in a metaphorical senses towards the lack of threat our identities face on the app, as users convey an alienated version of themselves; therefore, there is no threat of disappointment, humiliation, or loss; only virtual ones. But what is a virtual win? When you exceed a thousand followers on Instagram? When your post is liked and shared millions? These are not meaningful entities, so no connection or commitment can be made on Instagram, there is no risk as long as we are in control of what we allow other people to see.

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[7] Shannon Valor, 'Social Networking and Ethics' 2.2 para.1

[8] *Ibid.*, p.643.

[9] Smith, p.241.

[10] Amelia Tait, 'How Instagram changed our world', *The Guardian,* 3 May 2020, <How Instagram changed our world | Instagram | The Guardian> [accessed 3 March 2024] (para 9 of 22)

Parasocial relationships are 'nonreciprocal socioemotional connections with media figures such as celebrities or influencers' [11] and are formed on Instagram and X daily. In an investigation into parasocial relationships (PSRs), social media, and wellbeing, Hoffner and Bond investigate the positive and negative elements of PSRs and claim that they have the opportunity to 'beneficially influence multiple dimensions of wellbeing among media users, but adverse well-being outcomes may also occur. PSRs on social media can promote healthy attitudes and behaviours and lower health-related stigma but may adversely impact mental health through negative self-comparisons.' [12] Within X and Instagram PSRs cannot mimic a real-life relationship with emotional connection because the user following the celebrity (who are instructed for PR reasons to engage with their followers, most likely earning from these posts) does not interact with them in a humane context. 'Reclaiming Conversation, The Power of Talk in A Digital Age' was published in 2015 by psychologist Sherry Turkle and it addresses the importance of human conversation in our present age, which often prioritises parasocial relationships over human relationships. In her second chapter 'The Flight from Conversation' Turkle provides examples of how our phones dominate over conversation writing that, "the mere presence of a phone on the table (even turned off) changes what people talk about. If we think we might be interrupted, we keep conversations light, on topic of little controversy or consequence. **And conversations with phones on the landscape block empathic connection**."[13] Turkle proposes that in the short-term, online communication makes us feel more in charge of our time and self-presentation, which alludes to the inherent use of social media as a symptom of a wider, nihilistic feeling within our generation, where we crave control in a chaotic world. With reference to parasocial relationships, Turkle's claims present the consequences of social media usage and parasocial relationships; due to our overuse of these platforms, which provide us with short term escapism and little risk we jeopardise our real-life relationships and place more importance towards our 'connections' on Instagram and X. They allow us to play with these notions of identity, commitment and meaning, without risking the irrevocable consequences that ground real identities and relationships; conforming to Kierkegaard's theory that the present age, and our present age, is one devoid of passion.

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[11] Cynthia A. Hoffner, Bradley J. Bond, 'Parasocial relationships, social media, & well-being', *Current Opinion in Psychology,* Volume 45, (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2022.101306> [accessed 3 March 2024] (p.1)

[12] Bond, Hoffner, p.1

[13] Turkle, Sherry, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC, 2016) pp.21

However, there are cases where using X and Instagram do involve risk and individuals face the consequences of their virtual actions in reality. The nature of X is of nonsensical chatter, where anyone and everyone can share their opinions, and it is unbeknownst to the user if a large amount of users will interact with it or not. Writing for the New York Times in 2015, Jon Ronson discusses the case of Justine Sacco in the article titled "How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up Justine Sacco's Life." [14] Sacco, senior director of corporate communications at IAC, was travelling from New York to South Africa and during her layover tweeted, 'Going to Africa. Hope I don't get AIDS. Just kidding. I'm white!' Assuming that nobody would interact with her tweet, she boarded her 11-hour flight and slept unaware about the catastrophe happening on X. Upon landing, she received a text from an old friend; "I'm so sorry to see what's happening". Sacco's X feed had become a horror show; "In light of @Justine-Sacco disgusting racist tweet, I'm donating to @care today" And then one from her employer, IAC, the corporate owner of The Daily Beast, OKCupid and Vimeo: "This is an outrageous, offensive comment. Employee in question currently unreachable on an intl flight." The anger soon turned to excitement: "All I want for Christmas is to see @JustineSacco's face when her plane lands and she checks her inbox/voicemail'"[15] X had turned into a court for the politically correct, a crusade against bigotry and a form of idle entertainment for users who found joy in tearing Sacco apart. X is a brutally shaming network, where people can reach no.1 trending throughout the world for their scandalous opinions, thus which they reach as other users express collective fury under the same hashtag. SNS are perfectly designed to manipulate our desire for approval, and this is what led to Sacco's downfall. Her tormentors were instantly congratulated in their take down, their motivation much the same as Sacco's own- a bid for the attention of strangers, yet without facing the risk of having to confront each other in the real world. However, the shamed person on X is really the exception to the rule because the mass users remain in anonymity, and this lack of risk still pertains to the mob. It is often that we see people 'cancelled' in this way perhaps once a month? Yet on a wider scale this is nothing in comparison to the immense chatter found, specifically on X, because it thrives on shaming others.

With the media consistently changing throughout history and creating cultural shifts, these are not un-surprising issues, for example Kierkegaard's 'The Present Age' confronts issues around the condition

[14] Jon Ronson, 'How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up Justine Sacco's Life' *The New York Times Magazine,* 12 February 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/15/magazine/how-one-stupid-tweet-ruined-justine-saccos-life.html> [accessed 3 March 2024] (para.10 of 62)

[15] Jon Ronson, 'How One Stupid Tweet Blew Up Justine Sacco's Life' (para.10 of 62)

of a cheap and ubiquitous penny press. With each revolution comes a new enabling of a mass production of information, giving rise to 'the public' [16] Both Kierkegaard and Dreyfus emphasise the importance of commitment, with Dreyfus concluding that:

> "If Kierkegaard is right, for the cyber world to avoid despair, it would have to find a way of **cancelling its risk-free attraction** by somehow supporting and **encouraging unconditional commitments and strong identities in the real world** where risk of failure and disappointment is inevitable."[17]

In our present age, Dreyfus's claim still remains, and in the past 25 years this risk-free attraction has been amplified to form a new degree of alienation. We are attached to our devices, they are accessible to us in any scenario, we can always jump onto X and Instagram and enter another world, which is devoid of passion and disconnects us from our loved ones and where commitments cannot be formed. Kierkegaard emphasises how unconditional commitments give one an identity, thereby fulfilling a purpose in life. So, in a world dominated by SNS, one must find an external passion, completely out with the electronic domain in order to make meaningful commitments and form a strong identity, where the risk of failure makes one grow and learn as an individual.

Dreyfus's interpretation of Kierkegaard's concept of the present age provides a captivating account of technology at the time in 1999 and allows comparisons to be made between his claims of the future of technology and our present age. Many of Dreyfus's claims, in my opinion, have become reality in a fashion unpredictable in the late 90s. The likes of X and Instagram cannot find a way of cancelling its risk-free attraction because this is the entire basis it is built upon, where one is allowed to convey an alienated persona of themselves to the world, therefore, if one is consistently active on these applications, they can never truly escape the conformity of the public, which in our present age takes the form of SNS. The irony being that I and Dreyfus's argument are built upon the basis of Kierkegaard's 'The Present Age' as we live in a world where individuals are everything but present, thanks to SNS.

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[16] Rick Searle, 'Would Kierkegaard Tweet?' *Utopia or Dystopia, 3 June 2023* < Would Kierkegaard Tweet? « Utopia or Dystopia> [accessed 20 March 2024] (para 2 of 14)

[17] *Ibid.,* p.646

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