

Hiding Behind the Screen

Roger Scruton

Human relations, and the self-image of the human being, have been profoundly affected by the Internet and by the ease with which images of other people can be summoned to the computer screen to become the objects of emotional attention. How should we conceptualize this change, and what is its effect on the psychic condition of those most given to constructing their world of interests and relationships through the screen? Is this change as damaging as many would have us believe, undermining our capacity for real relationships and placing a mere fantasy of relatedness in their stead? Or is it relatively harmless, as unproblematic as speaking to a friend on the telephone?

First, we should make some distinctions. We all now use the computer to send messages to our friends and to others with whom we have dealings. This sort of communication is not different in any fundamental respect from the old practice of letter writing, except for its speed. Of course, we should not regard speed as a trivial feature. The rapidity of modern communications does not merely accelerate the process whereby relationships are formed and severed; it inevitably changes how those relationships are conducted and understood. Absence is less painful with the Internet and the telephone, but it also loses some of its poignancy; moreover, e-mails are seldom composed as carefully as letters, since the very slowness with which a letter makes its way to its destination prompts us to put more of our feelings into the words. Still, e-mail is reality, not virtual reality, and the changes it has brought about are changes in real communication between real people.

Nor does the existence of social networks like Facebook, which are also for the most part real communication between real people, involve any attempt simply to substitute a virtual reality for the actual one. On the contrary, they are parasitic on the real relationships they foster, and which they alter in large part by encouraging people to put themselves on display, and in turn to become voyeurs of the displays of others. Some

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might claim that the existence of these networking sites provides a social and psychological benefit, helping those who shy away from presenting themselves directly to the world to gain a public place and identity. These sites also enable people to keep in touch with a wide circle of friends and colleagues, thereby increasing the range of their affections, and filling the world with goodwill and happy feelings.

Yet already something new is entering the world of human relations with these innocent-seeming sites. There is a novel ease with which people can make contact with each other through the screen. No more need to get up from your desk and make the journey to your friend's house. No more need for weekly meetings, or the circle of friends in the downtown restaurant or bar. All those effortful ways of making contact can be dispensed with: a touch of the keyboard and you are there, where you wanted to be, on the site that defines your friends. But **can this be real friendship, when it is pursued and developed in such facile and costless ways?**

Friendship and Control

Real friendship shows itself in action and affection. The real friend is the one who comes to the rescue in your hour of need; who is there with comfort in adversity and who shares with you his own success. This is hard to do on the screen—the screen, after all, is primarily a locus of information, and is only a place of action insofar as communication is a form of action. Only words, and not hands or the things they carry, can reach from it to comfort the sufferer, to ward off an enemy's blows, or to provide any of the tangible assets of friendship in a time of need. It is arguable that the more people satisfy their need for companionship through relationships carried out on the screen, the less will they develop friendships of that other kind, the kind that offers help and comfort in the real trials of human life. Friendships that are carried out primarily on the screen cannot easily be lifted off it, and when they are so lifted, there is no guarantee that they will take any strain. Indeed, **it is precisely their cost-free, screen-friendly character that attracts many people to them—so much so, students of mine tell me, that they fear addiction, and often have to forbid themselves to go to their Facebook account for days on end, in order to get on with their real lives and their real relationships.**

What we are witnessing is a change in the *attention* that mediates and gives rise to friendship. In the once normal conditions of human contact, people became friends by being in each other's presence, understanding all the many subtle signals, verbal and bodily, whereby another testifies

to his character, emotions, and intentions, and building affection and trust in tandem. Attention was fixed on the other—on his face, words, and gestures. And his nature as an embodied person was the focus of the friendly feelings that he inspired. People building friendship in this way are strongly aware that they appear to the other as the other appears to them. The other's face is a mirror in which they see their own. Precisely because attention is fixed on the other there is an opportunity for self-knowledge and self-discovery, for that expanding freedom in the presence of the other which is one of the joys of human life. The object of friendly feelings looks back at you, and freely responds to your free activity, amplifying both your awareness and his own. As traditionally conceived, friendship was ruled by the maxim "know thyself."

When attention is fixed on the other as mediated by the screen, however, there is a marked shift in emphasis. For a start, I have my finger on the button; at any moment I can turn the image off, or click to arrive at some new encounter. The other is free in his *own* space, but he is not really free in *my* space, over which I am the ultimate arbiter. I am not risking myself in the friendship to nearly the same extent as I risk myself when I meet the other face to face. Of course, the other may so grip my attention with his messages, images, and requests that I stay glued to the screen. Nevertheless, it is ultimately a *screen* that I am glued to, and not the face that I see in it. All interaction with the other is at a distance, and whether I am affected by it becomes to some extent a matter of my own choosing.

In this screenful form of conducting relationships, I enjoy a power over the other person of which he himself is not really aware—since he is not aware of how much I wish to retain him in the space before me. And the power I have over him he has too over me, just as I am denied the same freedom in his space that he is denied in mine. He, too, therefore, will not risk himself; he appears on the screen only on condition of retaining that ultimate control himself. This is something I know about him that he knows that I know—and vice versa. There grows between us a reduced-risk encounter, in which each is aware that the other is fundamentally *withheld*, sovereign within his impregnable cyber-castle.

But that is not the only way in which cyber-relationships are affected by the medium of their formation. For instance, while "messaging" is still very much alive on Facebook, much of it is depersonalized in nature: the use of private messages has for many been supplanted by posting messages on a friend's public "Wall," meaning that the entire network is now participant in the communiqué. And while the Wall post still maintains the semblance of interpersonal contact, probably the most common form of communica-

tion on Facebook is the “status update,” a message that is broadcast from one person to everyone (or, put another way, to no one in particular).

All of these communications, along with everything on the screen, appear in competition with whatever else might be called up by the mouse. You “click on” your friend, as you might click on a news item or a music video. He is one of the many products on display. Friendship with him, and relationships generally, belong in the category of amusements and distractions, a commodity that may be chosen, or not, depending on the rival goods. This contributes to a radical demotion of the personal relationship. Your friendships are no longer special to you and definitive of your moral life: they are amusements, things that have no real life of their own but borrow their life from your interest in them—what the Marxists would call “fetishes.”

There is a strong argument to be made that the Facebook experience, which has attracted millions of people from all around the world, is an antidote to shyness, a way in which people otherwise cripplingly intimidated by the venture outwards into society are able to overcome their disability and enjoy the web of affectionate relationships on which so much of our happiness depends. But there is an equally strong argument that the Facebook experience, to the extent that it is supplanting the physical realm of human relationships, hypostatizes shyness, retains its principal features, while substituting an ersatz kind of affection for the real affection that shyness fears. For by placing a screen between yourself and the friend, while retaining ultimate control over what appears on that screen, you also hide from the real encounter—denying the other the power and the freedom to challenge you in your deeper nature and to call on you here and now to take responsibility for yourself and for him.

I was taught growing up that shyness (unlike modesty) is not a virtue but a defect, and that it comes from placing too high a value on yourself—a value that forbids you to risk yourself in the encounter with others. By removing the *real* risks from interpersonal encounters, the Facebook experience might encourage a kind of narcissism, a self-regarding posture in the midst of what should have been other-regarding friendship. In effect, there may be nothing more than the display of self, the others listed on the website counting for nothing in themselves.

Freedom Requires Context

In its normal occurrence, the Facebook encounter is still an encounter—however attenuated—between real people. But increasingly,

the screen is taking over—ceasing to be a medium of communication between real people who exist elsewhere, and becoming the place where people finally achieve reality, the only place where they relate in any coherent way to others. This next stage is evident in the “avatar” phenomenon, in which people create virtual characters in virtual worlds as proxies for themselves, so enabling their controllers to live in complete self-complacency behind the screen, exposed to no danger and yet enjoying a kind of substitute affection through the adventures of their cyber-ego.

The game Second Life offers a virtual world and invites you to enter it in the form of an avatar constructed from its collection of templates. It has its own currency, in which purchases can be made in its own stores. It rents spaces to avatars as their homes and businesses. By late 2009, the company that created Second Life announced that its user base had collectively logged more than a billion hours in the system and had conducted business transactions worth more than a billion dollars.

Second Life also provides opportunities for “social” action, with social positions achieved by merit—or, at any rate, virtual merit. In this way people can enjoy, through their avatars, cost-free versions of the social emotions, and can become heroes of “compassion,” without lifting a finger in the real world. In one notorious incident in 2007, a man attempted to sue an avatar for theft of his Second Life intellectual property. The property itself was an “adult entertainment” product—one among many such Second Life products now available that enable your cyber-ego to realize your wildest fantasies at no risk to yourself. There have been many reports of couples who have never met in person conducting adulterous affairs entirely in cyberspace; they usually show no guilt towards their spouses, and in fact proudly display their emotions as though they had achieved some kind of moral breakthrough by ensuring that it was only their avatars, and not they themselves, that ended up in bed together.

Most people probably would see this as an unhealthy state of affairs. It is one thing to place a screen between yourself and the world; it is another thing to inhabit the world on that screen as the primary sphere of your relationships. **In vesting one’s emotional life in the adventures of an avatar, one retreats completely from real relationships. Instead of being a means to augment relationships that exist outside of it, the Internet could become the sole arena of social life—but an unreal life involving unreal people.** The thought of this reawakens all of those once-fashionable claims of alienation and the fetishism of commodities of which Marx and his followers accused capitalist society. **The nerd controlling the avatar has essentially “placed his being outside of himself,” as they would have put it.**

The origin of those critiques lies in an idea of Hegel's, an idea of enduring importance that is constantly resurging in new guises, especially in the writings of psychologists concerned with mapping the contours of ordinary happiness. The idea is this: we human beings fulfill ourselves through our own free actions, and through the consciousness that these actions bring of our individual worth. But we are not free in a state of nature, nor do we, outside the world of human relations, have the kind of consciousness of self that allows us to value and intend our own fulfillment. Freedom is not reducible to the unhindered choices that even an animal might enjoy; nor is self-consciousness simply a matter of the pleasurable immersion in immediate experiences, like the rat pressing endlessly on the pleasure switch. Freedom involves an active engagement with the world, in which opposition is encountered and overcome, risks are taken and satisfactions weighed: it is, in short, an exercise of practical reason, in pursuit of goals whose value must justify the efforts needed to obtain them. Likewise, self-consciousness, in its fully realized form, involves not merely an openness to present experience, but a sense of my own existence *as an individual*, with plans and projects that might be fulfilled or frustrated, and with a clear conception of what *I* am doing, for what purpose, and with what hope of happiness.

All those ideas are contained in the term first introduced by the philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte to denote the inner goal of a free personal life: *Selbstbestimmung*, self-determination or self-certainty. Hegel's crucial claim is that the life of freedom and self-certainty can only be obtained through others. I become fully myself only in contexts which compel me to recognize that I am another in others' eyes. I do not acquire my freedom and individuality and then, as it were, try them out in the world of human relations. It is only by entering that world, with its risks, conflicts, and responsibilities, that I come to know myself as free, to enjoy my own perspective and individuality, and to become a fulfilled person among persons.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel tells many pleasing and provocative parables about the way in which the subject achieves freedom and fulfillment through his *Entäußerung*—his objectification—in the world of others. The status of these parables—whether they are arguments or allegories, conceptual analyses or psychological generalizations—has always been a matter of dispute. But few psychologists now would dispute the fundamental claim that underpins them, which is that **the freedom and fulfillment of the self come about only through the recognition of the other.** Without others, my freedom is an

empty cipher. And recognition of the other involves taking full responsibility for my own existence as the individual who I am.

In his efforts to “set Hegel on his feet,” the young Marx drew an important contrast between the true freedom that comes to us through relationships with other subjects and the hidden enslavement that comes when our ventures outwards are not towards subjects but towards objects. In other words, he suggested, *we must distinguish the realization of the self, in free relations with others, from the alienation of the self in the system of things.* That is the core of his critique of private property, and it is a critique that is as much bound up with allegory and storytelling as the original Hegelian arguments. In later writings the critique is transformed into the theory of “fetishism,” according to which people lose their freedom through making fetishes of commodities. A fetish is something that is animated by a *transferred* life. The consumer in a capitalist society, according to Marx, transfers his life into the commodities that bewitch him, and so loses that life—becoming a slave to commodities precisely through seeing the market in goods rather than the free interactions of people; as the place where his desires are brokered and fulfilled.

These critiques of property and the market, it should be noted, do not merit endorsement. They are flamboyant offshoots of a Hegelian philosophy which, properly understood, endorses free transactions in a market as much as it endorses free relations between people generally—indeed, it sees the one as an application of the other. Rather, the crucial idea from which we may still learn is that of the *Entäusserung*, the realization of the self through responsible relations with others. This is the core contribution of German Romantic philosophy to the understanding of the modern condition, and it is an idea that has direct application to the problems that we see emerging in our new world of social life conducted on the Internet. In the sense in which freedom is a value, freedom is also an artifact that comes into being through the mutual interaction of people. This mutual interaction is what raises us from the animal condition to the personal condition, enabling us to take responsibility for our lives and actions, to evaluate our goals and character, and both to understand the nature of personal fulfillment and to set about desiring and intending it.

This process of raising ourselves above the animal condition is crucial, as the Hegelians emphasized, to the growth of the human subject as a self-knowing agent, capable of entertaining and acting from reasons, and with a developed first-person perspective and a sense of his reality as one subject among others. It is a process that depends upon real conflicts and real resolutions, in a shared public space where each of us is fully

accountable for what he is and does. Anything that interferes with that process, by undermining the growth of interpersonal relations, by confiscating responsibility, or by preventing or discouraging an individual from making long-term rational choices and adopting a concrete vision of his own fulfillment, is an evil. It may be an unavoidable evil; but it is an evil all the same, and one that we should strive to abolish if we can.

Television and the Trend Toward Self-Alienation

Transferring our social lives onto the Internet is only one of the ways in which we damage or retreat from this process of self-realization. Long before that temptation arose (and preparing the way for it) was the lure of television, which corresponds exactly to the Hegelian and Marxist critique of the fetish—an inanimate thing in which we invest our life, and so lose it. Of course we retain ultimate control over the television: we can turn it off. But people don't, on the whole; they remain fixed to the screen in many of those moments when they might otherwise be building relationships through conversation, activities, conflicts, and projects. The television has, for a vast number of our fellow human beings, destroyed family meals, home cooking, hobbies, homework, study, and family games. It has rendered many people largely inarticulate, and deprived them of the simple ways of making direct conversational contact with their fellows. This is not a question of TV's "dumbing down" of thought and imagination, or its manipulation of people's desires and interests through brazen imagery. Those features are familiar enough, and the constant target of despairing criticism. Nor am I referring only to its addictive quality—though research by the psychologists Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Robert Kubey offers convincing evidence that TV is addictive in the same way as gambling and drugs.

The concern is rather the nature of television as a replacement for human relationships. By watching people interacting on TV sitcoms, the junkie is able to dispense with interactions of his own. Those energies and interests that would otherwise be focused on others—in storytelling, arguing, singing together, or playing games; in walking, talking, eating, and acting—are consumed on the screen, in vicarious lives that involve no engagement of the viewer's own moral equipment. And that equipment therefore atrophies.

We see this everywhere in modern life, but nowhere more vividly than in the students who arrive in our colleges. These divide roughly into two kinds: those from TV-sodden homes, and those who have grown up

talking. Those of the first kind tend to be reticent, inarticulate, given to aggression when under stress, unable to tell a story or express a view, and seriously hampered when it comes to taking responsibility for a task, an activity, or a relationship. Those of the second kind are the ones who step forward with ideas, who go out to their fellows, who radiate the kind of freedom and adventurousness that makes learning a pleasure and risk a challenge. Since these students have had atypical upbringings, they are prone to be subjects of mockery. But they have a head start over their TV-addled contemporaries. The latter can still be freed from their vice; university athletics, theater, music, and so on can help to marginalize TV in campus life. But in many other public or semi-public spaces, television has now become a near necessity: it flickers in the background, reassuring those who have bestowed their life on it that their life goes on.

These criticisms of television parallel criticisms of the “fetishizing” nature of mass culture made by Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and other members of the neo-Marxist Frankfurt school. Interestingly enough, the Frankfurt school ideas have been recently put to use in criticizing another way in which we can now achieve instant and cost-free stimulation: the iPod. In his 2008 book *Sound Moves*, Michael Bull draws on the “cultural theory” of Horkheimer and Adorno to argue that, thanks to the iPod, urban space has in many ways ceased to be public space and has become fragmented and privatized, each person retreating into his own inviolable sphere and losing his dependency upon and interest in his fellows. This process not only alienates people from each other, it enables people to retain control over their sensations, and so shut out the world of chance, risk, and change.

Although there is good reason to be sympathetic with Bull’s argument, as well as those original criticisms of the consumer economy made by Adorno and Horkheimer, their criticisms had the wrong target: namely, the system of capitalist production and the emerging culture industry which forms part of it. The object of Adorno and company’s scorn was the substitution of risk-free and addictive pleasures for the pleasures of understanding, freedom, and relationship. They may have been right in thinking that the culture industry has a propensity to favor the first kind of pleasure, for this kind of pleasure is easily packaged and marketed. But take away the healthy ways of growing up through relationships and the addictive pleasures will automatically take over, even where there is no culture industry to exploit them—as we witnessed in communist Europe. And, just like the theater, the media of mass culture can also be used positively (by those with critical judgment) to enhance and deepen our real sympathies. The correct response to the ills of television is not to attack

those who manufacture televisions or who stock them with rubbish: it is to concentrate on the kind of education that makes it possible to take a critical approach to television, so as to demand real insight and real emotion, rather than kitsch, Disney, or porn. And the same is true for the iPod.

To work towards this critical approach means getting clear about the virtues of *direct* rather than vicarious relations. Why, as Villiers de l'Isle-Adam said, do we go to the trouble of living rather than asking our servants to do it for us? Why do we criticize those who eat burgers on the couch, while life plays out its pointless drama on the screen? Get clear about these questions, and we can begin to educate children in the art of turning off the television.

The avatar can therefore be seen as merely the latest point in a process of alienation whereby people learn to “put their lives outside of themselves,” to make their lives into playthings over which they retain complete, though in some way deeply specious, control. (They control physically what controls them psychologically.) And this is why it is so tempting to look back to those old Hegelian and Marxist theories. For they were premised on the view that we become free only by “moving outwards,” embodying our freedom in shared activities and mutually responsible relations. And the Hegelians distinguished a true from a false way of “moving outwards”: one in which we gain our freedom by giving it real and objective form, as opposed to one in which we lose it by investing it in objects that alienate us from our inner life. Those theories show how the thing that we (or at any rate the followers of Hegel) most value in human life—self-realization in a condition of freedom—is separated by a thin dividing line from the thing which destroys us—self-alienation in a condition of bondage.

Impressive though they are, however, the Hegelian-Marxist theories are shot through with metaphor and speculation; they are not anchored in empirical research or explanatory hypotheses; they rely for their plausibility entirely on *a priori* thoughts about the nature of freedom, and about the metaphysical distinction between subject and object. If they are to be of use to us we will have to translate them into a more down-to-earth and practical language—one that will tell us how our children should be educated, if we are to bring them out from behind the screen.

The Necessary Risks of Life Off the Screen

We must come to an understanding, then, of **what is at stake in the current worries concerning the Internet, avatars, and life on the screen.** The

first issue at stake is risk. We are rational beings, endowed with practical as well as theoretical reasoning. And our practical reasoning develops through our confrontation with risk and uncertainty. To a large extent, life on the screen is risk-free: when we click to enter some new domain, we risk nothing immediate in the way of physical danger, and our accountability to others and risk of emotional embarrassment is attenuated. This is vividly apparent in the case of pornography—and the addictive nature of pornography is familiar to all who have to work in counseling those whom it has brought to a state of distraught dependency. The porn addict gains some of the benefits of sexual excitement, without any of the normal costs; but the costs are part of what sex means, and by avoiding them, one is destroying in oneself the capacity for sexual attachment.

This freedom from risk is one of the most significant features of Second Life, and it is also present (to an extent) on social networking sites like Facebook. One can enter and leave relationships conducted solely via the screen without any embarrassment, remaining anonymous or operating under a pseudonym, hiding behind an avatar or a false photograph of oneself. A person can decide to “kill” his screen identity at any time, and he will suffer nothing as a consequence. Why, then, trouble to enter the world of real encounters, when this easy substitute is available? And when the substitute becomes a habit, the virtues needed for the real encounter do not develop.

It should not go unmentioned that the habit of reducing risk is one that is widespread in our society, and indeed encouraged by government. An unhealthy obsession with health and an unsafe craze for safety have confiscated many of the risks that previous generations have not merely taken for granted but incorporated into the process of moral education. From the padding of children’s playgrounds and the mandating of helmets for skateboarders to the criminalization of wine at the family table, the health-and-safety fanatics have surrounded us at every point with a web of prohibitions, while encouraging the belief that risks are not the concern of the individual but a matter of public policy. Children are not, on the whole, encouraged to risk themselves in physical ways; and it is not surprising if they are reluctant, in consequence, to risk themselves in emotional ways either.

But it is unlikely that this is either the source of risk-avoidance in human relationships, or a real indication of the right and the wrong way to proceed. No doubt children need physical risk and adventure if they are to develop as responsible people, with their full quota of courage, prudence, and practical wisdom. But risks of the soul are unlike risks of the body;

you don't learn to manage them by being exposed to them. As we know, children exposed to sexual predation do not learn to deal with it but, on the contrary, tend to acquire the habit of *not* dealing with it: of altogether closing off a genuine emotional engagement with their sexuality, reducing it to a raw, angry bargaining, learning to treat themselves as objects and losing the capacity to risk themselves in love. Much modern sex education, which teaches that the only risks of sex are medical, exposes children to the same kind of harm, encouraging them to enter the world of sexual relations without the capacity to give or receive erotic love, and so learning to see sex as lying outside the realm of lasting relationships—a source of pleasure rather than love.

In human relations, risk avoidance means the avoidance of *accountability*, the refusal to stand *judged* in another's eyes, the refusal to come *face to face* with another person, to give oneself in whatever measure to him or her, and so to run the risk of rejection. Accountability is not something we should avoid; it is something we need to learn. Without it we can never acquire either the capacity to love or the virtue of justice. Other people will remain for us merely complex devices, to be negotiated in the way that animals are negotiated, for our own advantage and without opening the possibility of mutual judgment. Justice is the ability to see the other as having a claim on you, as being a free subject just as you are, and as demanding your accountability. To acquire this virtue you must learn the habit of face-to-face encounters, in which you solicit the other's consent and cooperation rather than imposing your will. The retreat behind the screen is a way of retaining control over the encounter, while minimizing the need to acknowledge the other's point of view. It involves setting your will outside yourself, as a feature of virtual reality, while not risking it as it must be risked, if others are truly to be encountered. To encounter another person in his freedom is to acknowledge his sovereignty and his right: it is to recognize that the developing situation is no longer within your exclusive control, but that you are caught up by it, made real and accountable in the other's eyes by the same considerations that make him real and accountable in yours.

In sexual encounters it is surely obvious that this process of “going out” to the other must occur if there is to be a genuine gift of love, and if the sexual act is to be something more than the friction of body parts. Learning to “go out” in this way is a complex moral process, which cannot be simplified without setting sex outside the process of psychological attachment. And it seems clear—though it is by no means easy to give final proof of it—that attachment is increasingly at risk, and that the

cause of this is precisely that sexual pleasure comes without justice or commitment. It is surely plausible to suggest that when we rely on the screen as the forum of personal development, we learn habits of relationship without the discipline of accountability, so that sex, when one arrives at it (as even the screen addict may eventually), will be regarded in the same narcissistic way as the vicarious excitements through which it has been rehearsed. It will occur in that indefinable “elsewhere” from which the soul takes flight, even in the moment of pleasure.

Perhaps we can survive in a world of virtual relations; but it is not a world into which children can easily enter, except as intruders. Avatars may reproduce on the screen: but they will not fill the world with real human children. And the cyber-parents of these avatar-children, deprived of all that makes people grow as moral beings—of risk, embarrassment, suffering, and love—will shrink to mere points of view, on a world in which they do not really occur.