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Moral Fog and the Appreciation of Value

DEAN COCKING
Delft Design for Values Institute

JEROEN VAN DEN HOVEN
Delft University of Technology

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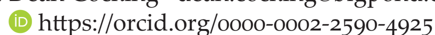
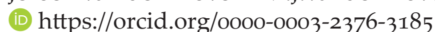
> By opening our eyes we do not necessarily see what confronts us. We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied, often falsifying *veil* which partially conceals the world. Our states of consciousness differ in quality. [. . .] And if quality matters, then anything which alters consciousness in the direction of unselfishness, objectivity and realism is to be connected with virtue.
>
> —Iris Murdoch, 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts'

> Who you gonna believe, me or your own eyes?
>
> —Chico Marx, *Duck Soup*

Introduction

We are delighted to have this wonderful opportunity to develop our thinking about the problem of 'moral fog' and of the flourishing of evil online. We owe special thanks to Roger Crisp for his significant help in developing our thoughts

Contact: Dean Cocking <dean.cocking@bigpond.com>

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2590-4925
Jeroen van den Hoven <M.J.vandenHoven@tudelft.nl>

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2376-3185

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over the past two years and for his terrific work as editor for this special issue.[1] We are also very grateful to Dale Dorsey, Philip Kitcher, and Carissa Véliz for their thoughtful and varied commentaries and the many helpful suggestions and directions they have given us.

In response, we have developed our account of the moral fog to show how it describes foundational problems for human capacities to appreciate value. We provide a diagnosis of the primary sources of the problem, and we describe how increasingly living online has fueled these wellsprings in spectacularly additional and distinctive ways. The enabling (or otherwise) of our capacities for value appreciation is fundamental to our prospects for moral progress. Thus, a focus on value appreciation and the problem of moral fog, we argue, provides foundational (and much needed) criteria and guidelines for the normative assessment and regulation of our lives, especially now as we increasingly live online and the fog around valuing thickens.

Our discussion proceeds in two sections. In section 1 we describe the primary sources of moral fog and how these have been built upon and expanded by increasingly living online. In section 2 we describe the social dependence of valuing and how some important morally educative social practices helping us out of our fog have also been lost and corrupted online.

Unselfing in the Age of the Selfie

The Fog for Appreciating Value

How does a schoolyard friend become an online bully? How do shy kids become super-spreaders of hate speech? How can we be more connected than ever yet loneliness has become a major health issue? How did the online revolution go from a great leap forward for democracy to a great leap backward? How did the authority of reason and science become social conspiracy, part of some matrix of illusion? Moral progress relies on the idea that our capacities for making good judgments are getting better. As we increasingly live online, however, we have reason to worry they are getting worse.

Good judgment is dependent upon our more basic and broader capacities for value appreciation. Value appreciation, along with our abilities for governance by it, lie at the core of our nature as moral beings.[2] Our capacities to appreciate

1. Thanks also to Tom Douglas for his excellent editorial suggestions.

2. As R. Jay Wallace puts it, 'What is valuable about persons is precisely their capacity to appreciate and respond to the good". See, R. Jay Wallace, ed., *The Practice of Value (The Berkeley Tanner Lectures)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 4. We make use of this excellent collection throughout our discussion and are greatly indebted to it.

and respond to value, however, are limited and vulnerable in many ways. We are all, much of the time (more or less) in something of a moral fog, our appreciation of value clouded, as Iris Murdoch describes, by 'falsifying veils'.[3] Our increasingly living online (however) has poured rocket fuel onto the problem.

Many are worried about the kind of rhetorical questions above and the fate of the moral life as we increasingly live online. Political scientists and observers, for example, worry about the fate of democracy as corporate and political organizations collect unprecedented data about what makes us tick, making us more vulnerable to manipulation and misinformation than ever. As Philip Kitcher describes, the approximation to something like a 'reasonably informed citizen' upon which the success of representative democracy depends now seems especially at risk.[4] Further, many social scientists and commentators are worried about the fate of our personal lives and of the broader relational fabric of society. For instance, while we have more 'social connection' in our new online worlds than previously imaginable, we are seemingly lonelier than ever.[5] Similarly, many worry about young people growing up online and how this is shaping their understanding of self and others. One problem, for example, is that life online is making them (even) more insecure, overly focused on their online likes, visits, and self-promotion.[6]

Iris Murdoch highlights one central kind of problem for our capacities for value appreciation. She describes how our condition as self-conscious beings brings with it a self-preoccupation that is anxiety-ridden and selfish and how both undermine our capacities to appreciate value.[7] Improving our capacities

3. Christine Korsgaard claims the source of our capacity for valuing lies in our capacity for normative or evaluative self-conception and describes how this can make us vulnerable to a whole set of external influences that distort our values. See Christine Korsgaard, 'Eternal Values, Evolving Values', in reply to Ian Morris's *Foragers, Farmers and Fossil Fuel* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp 184–201. She says, for instance, 'Our sense of self-worth makes us vulnerable to all kinds of influences, and those influences work by distorting our values' (p. 193). Korsgaard associates these distortions with 'ideologies'. We suggest they are no less associated with our sociotechnical milieu.

4. Philip Kitcher, 'Losing Your Way in the Fog: Reflections on *Evil Online*', p. 19.

5. As Sherry Turkle describes, we are 'maximally connected' but 'alone together'. See Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2011). Loneliness has now been widely recognized as a major health issue. In 2018, for instance, the United Kingdom introduced what is loosely known as a 'ministry for loneliness' to make the reduction of loneliness an ongoing parliamentary concern.

6. See, e.g., the large research project concerning how social media influences education and psychological development, Howard Gardner and Katie Davis, *The App Generation: How Today's Youth Navigate Identity, Intimacy and Imagination in a Digital World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 75–86.

7. Murdoch seems to run together selfishness with the anxiety-ridden self, but much anxiety-ridden self-preoccupation does not seem well captured by selfishness, such as widespread insecurities about looking ugly or stupid. The more general problem Murdoch has in mind that

for value appreciation, then, requires that we 'unself' from this anxiety-ridden selfishness of our self-consciousness.[8] Social media, however, enhances this malady of the modern liberal individual where thinking of oneself dominates and frames how one thinks of others and the world around oneself.

Like us, Murdoch points to a problem of moral fog as a fundamental obstacle for moral understanding, education, and progress. Our 'preoccupied self-concern' presents a widely shared important source of the problem since it comes with our condition as self-conscious beings. In addition to various problems that *we* bring to the table are the falsifying influences *others* bring.[9] Chico Marx draws our attention to this second, central kind of vulnerability involved in our capacities for value appreciation—namely, their dependence upon the help, or otherwise, we get from others. Our understanding, our capacities for understanding, are unavoidably and deeply dependent upon others and the world around us. This social dependence of value appreciation very much includes our abilities to see and unself from falsifying aspects of ourselves, such as our self-conscious anxieties and selfishness. Thus, our two vulnerabilities often come together.

For better or worse, we see ourselves and understand much of what we see through the lead of others and our settings. Our intimate relations are especially crucial enablers (or otherwise) of self-understanding, including in regard to falsifying aspects of self. This dependence and vulnerability are the conditions 'gaslighting' trades on, why it can work so well, and what Marx turns into a reductio. Moreover, our need for help is not confined to the extremes of our 'early' years (along with our 'later' ones). We continue to be unavoidably dependent upon others and our settings for knowledge, understanding, value appreciation, and virtue, such as when we enter new areas with which we are relatively unfamiliar.[10]

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would include a broader suite of self-regarding attitudes is the relentless self-concern of self-consciousness. As we say above, we think the more fundamental features sourcing moral fog are our subjectivity and contingency. Iris Murdoch, 'The Sovereignty of Good Over Other Concepts', *The Virtues: Contemporary Essays on Moral Character*, ed. Robert B. Kruschwitz and Robert C. Roberts (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1987), pp. 84–98.

8. Many and varied views about values, and of the quality of consciousness required to appreciate them, describe the need for some kind of 'unselfing'. For example, Kant's metaphysic of the moral comprehensively annexed the empirical self and Buddhists describe transcendence to value appreciation in terms of the dissolving of 'self'.

9. Robert Frank refers to behavioural externalities that can be both positive and negative. On the negative, for instance, he says, 'By analogy to the economist's language for describing the harm caused by environmental pollution, I refer to the effects of the latter environments as negative behavioural externalities'. Robert H. Frank, *Under the Influence: Putting Peer Pressure to Work* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020), pp. 191–92, Kindle ed.

10. See, e.g., chapter 4 of *Evil Online* where we describe our learning vulnerabilities and how they help explain the behaviour of subjects in many of our famous social science experiments, including, for instance, Solomon Asch's original 'obedience' experiments, Stanley Milgram's

There is now widespread attention across mainstream media to various disturbing cases and trends flourishing online, and many recognize the need for much greater regulation. Likewise, there is a rapidly increasing movement of philosophical and ethical analysis of life online. Current discussions, however, remain in need of a foundational normative approach to guide analyses of life online and to guide how we should think about and pursue greater regulation. Better understanding our capacities for value appreciation, in particular their limits and distortions and what helps and hinders them, is fundamental to better understanding the human pursuit of virtue and a worthwhile life. As such, a focus on our capacities for value appreciation provides a foundational guide for thinking about moral education and about the ethical design and regulation of our lives in the digital age. Everyone agrees that online platforms need to be designed in more value-sensitive ways, and value-sensitive design approaches have largely focused on giving values, such as respect or empathy, far more presence online. However, as Murdoch and Marx describe, we often fail to see what is right in front of us. Thus, even if our values have some presence, falsifying influences within us, and from others and our surrounds, commonly undermine our capacities to appreciate and respond to value.

The moral fog describes this general problem for our valuing, how our appreciation of value is limited, distorted, or out of focus altogether. This can be both because values have little presence in our environment to direct our focus and help guide us and because even when our values do have presence, we nevertheless (commonly) fail to appreciate them. We take decades to mature and are utterly reliant upon relatively functional moral (and mortal) education to do so. Moreover, absent moral maintenance (guides and censures) from the personal and sociopolitical worlds within which we find ourselves, we cannot expect too much clearing of the fog from our more mature, even morally well-educated, approximations to personhood. Moral fog remains because two fundamental features of our nature generate limits, distortions, and a lack of focus that produce it: our subjectivity and contingency. The problem is significant because of the significance of the limitations and distortions our subjectivity presents for value appreciation and the fleeting, fragile experiences our contingency allows for it.

Murdoch points the finger at our condition of self-consciousness, and the anxiety-ridden self-preoccupation it produces, as the source of the falsifying

'electro-shock' experiments, and Philip Zimbardo's 'Stanford Prison' experiment. As we also describe below, Aristotle highlights a strong ongoing dependence of our virtue on others and our sociopolitical surrounds—hence, for instance, the move to politics at the end of the *Nicomachean Ethics*; see, *N.E.*, X.9. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

veils for our capacities to appreciate value. We claim our conditions of subjective perspective and focus and of contingent possibilities for experience, reflection, and valuing as the fundamental wellsprings of moral fog. The fog of our anxiety-ridden self-preoccupation does not result *just* from our condition as self-conscious beings but also (or more so) from the limitations and distortions of our subjectivity and contingent possibilities for value appreciation. These limits and distortions present fundamental vulnerabilities undermining our pursuit of reality and value about which (in broad terms at least) we are very conscious. As a result, our self-awareness is also very much focused on these vulnerabilities and generates similarly fundamental anxieties, insecurities, and self-obsessions.

So how and why might things be getting worse as we live online? Let us begin with the main approach taken by those who think things are not getting worse or, if they are, that online communication is not the culprit.

'It's Just a Tool'

In an interview from 1999 (now widely circulated on social media) with Jeremy Paxman of the BBC, David Bowie talked about the Internet and the revolutionary forum for individual rebellion, expression, and creativity it seemed to promise. One especially apt exchange went like this:

> Paxman: "You don't think some of the claims being made for it [the Internet] are hugely exaggerated? When the telephone was invented people made amazing claims [about how it would change the world]."
>
> Bowie: "I know the president at the time was outrageous; he said he foresaw the day when every town in America would have a telephone [. . .] how dare he [. . .] absolute bullshit (laughs). No, you see I don't agree. I don't think we've seen even the tip of the iceberg. [. . .] I think the potential [. . .] both good and bad [. . .] is unimaginable. [. . .] I think we're actually on the cusp of something both exhilarating and terrifying."
>
> Paxman: "It's just a tool though isn't it?"
>
> Bowie: "No it's not [. . .] no. It's an alien life form (laughs)".[11]

11. 'David Bowie speaks to Jeremy Paxman on BBC Newsnight (1999)', YouTube, https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=davif+bowie+interview+1999+bbc&docid=608055566860224755&mid=1DB99748C5E6A18040971DB99748C5E6A1804097&view=detail&FORM=VIRE [accessed 28 August 2020].

There is a long and continuing history of appealing to the description 'it's *just* a tool' to account for the Internet and our use of it, as Moira Weigel illustrates (along with Mark Zuckerberg's relentless use of the description) in 'Silicon Valley's Sixty Year Love Affair with the Word "Tool" '.[12] Dale Dorsey takes the baton for this approach in this volume, claiming that the distinguishing feature of the Internet from pre-Internet life is (simply) that the Internet is a spectacular tool for effective communication. As a result, while it has caused evil to be communicated more effectively, it has likewise promoted the good more effectively. The medium itself, however, on this view, is neither good nor bad; it is just a great communication tool.[13]

First, however, (generally speaking) tools are not '*just* tools'. If something generates (or risks) notable normative effects (not just, e.g., by accident), then we cannot adequately describe that something without mention of them. Asbestos is an excellent building material in various ways, affording all sorts of terrific advances, including insulation, strength, flexibility, and durability. Unfortunately, it can also break down, release fibers into the atmosphere, and kill you. Accordingly, if you wanted to know about asbestos, these things would be important to know. If, for example, one had to sit a test to show an adequate knowledge of asbestos, one would not pass that test by declaring, 'It's *just* a building material'. Likewise, the goose that laid the golden egg was not just a goose, nor the egg just an egg. 'It's *just* a tool' (like 'it's *just* my work' or 'it's *just* business' in other contexts) is a reductive (mis)description that is invariably used to turn our focus away from appreciating the *dis*value attached to the Internet.

Moreover, even where there are significant goods to be achieved by 'proper' use of *X*, we err on the side of caution where misuse of *X* may also cause significantly bad effects. Hence, despite the revolutionary advances it offered as a building material, we ban or very strictly regulate the use of asbestos. We certainly do not allow, for example, children and young people to use it. Thus, even if we focus on the 'it *just* depends upon how you use it' part of the description (rather than the 'it's *just* a tool' part), the problem of setting aside the (important) normative realities attached to using the thing remains. Indeed, it is not only children, young people, and others lacking some competence that need help

12. Moira Weigel, 'Silicon Valley's Sixty Year Love Affair with the Word "Tool" ', *New Yorker*, 12 April 2018. For a collection of recent defenders of the theme that 'tech is a just a tool', see Pew Research Center, 'Tech Is (Just) a Tool', https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/06/30/tech-is-just-a-tool accessed 4 January 2021).

13. Dale Dorsey, 'Moral Intensifiers and the Efficiency of Communication', p. 6.

online. Living in virtual worlds compounds problems of moral fog for otherwise normal, well-adjusted, and fortunate (enough) adults.[14]

The distinguishing mark of Internet communication compared to that before, says Dale Dorsey, is simply *the efficiency of communication* online.[15] Dorsey's main theme against our claims concerning the proliferation in degree and kind of evils online is to query or deny that they 'are representative of our lives online or, indeed, have anything to do with the existence of the Internet per se'.[16] He suggests, instead, that the efficiency of Internet communication and the resultant amplification of views explains any increase in evils online and explains away our claims of new *kinds* of evils flourishing online. He makes his case in reply to a few of our examples, such as a case of rape filmed and spread online and the erosion of the plural worlds and related values of the public and private realms online.[17] In the rape case, however, it seems clear that it would not have been 'half the fun' had it not been filmed, commented upon, and shared online. Moreover, while appalling acts of such sorts have, of course, long occurred, this case is just one of many we give that highlights the additional traction provided by the online context, such as, for example, the online *trend* of 'happy slapping' where harm is done *for* the attention it will get when uploaded and maximally shared.[18]

14. In her essay 'Liberal Man', Susan Mendus describes an important form of fog that comes with our increasing engagement with technology—that we increasingly think of *ourselves* as tools: 'In the pursuit of technological omnipotence man becomes more like a tool himself. His value is no longer an intrinsic value, defined by reference of his neediness, but an instrumental value, defined in terms of the power he can exert over other things" (p. 51). See Susan Mendus, 'Liberal Man', in *Philosophy and Politics*, ed. G.M.K. Hunt (London: Royal Institute of Philosophy, 1990), pp. 45–59.

15. See, p. 6. Dorsey says he agrees that the efficiency of the medium spreads evil more efficiently; however, he suggests, it also spreads much good more efficiently. Hence, he thinks, the efficiency does not tend toward evildoing especially. The efficiency of the medium is 'janus-faced' he says. (p. 12) We allow that many of the features of the medium are 'janus-faced', giving traction to both evil and good online (*Evil Online*, p. 38). Thus, we agree, like many technologies, significant effects, both good and bad, often result from the same considerations. If the bads, however, are very notable, then we have serious cause for concern about any given consideration, even if it also produces some important goods. This is precisely Kitcher's point (against us): What good does it achieve if we get all the knowledge of Wiki but the same explosion in information and unregulated access to all manner of views is also accelerating the demise of democracy and of the planet? Our main point, of course, is that the issue is not just about one consideration, such as efficiency broadly construed. Instead, the problems giving evil online special traction are something of a 'perfect storm' of factors, which together really do produce evils not only of greater magnitude but of different kinds.

16. Dorsey, 'Moral Intensifiers', p. 7.

17. Dorsey, pp. 7–8.

18. In 'Mass Murder of, and for, the Internet' Kevin Roose describes how the attacks on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, that killed fifty-one people were fueled by the pursuit of attention on the Internet. See Roose, 'Mass Murder of, and for, the Internet', *New York Times*, 15 May 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/technology/facebook-youtube-christchurch-shooting.html.

In reply to our worries about the demolition of the plural worlds of public and private life, Dorsey gives the example of young girls posting advertisements in magazines in the pre-Internet world to trade personal information for personal connection—a long-standing trade-off by teenagers, he notes. Thus, even if we are right and the revolution of living our social lives online has undertaken a demolition job on public/private contrasts, this remains only a difference in degree. However, as we live online and the demolition of public/private contrasts grows in magnitude in our lives, then, as we argued in *Evil Online*,[19] we lose and distort many important values in additional and distinctive ways.

Amplification often produces significant changes and distortions that transform the content that results and so the *kind* of thing (such as the kind of communication tool) that is produced. Jimi Hendrix provided many spectacular practical demonstrations of how amplification produces distortion to transform content and the kind of communication provided by electric guitar. Joseph Raz gives us a compelling general theoretical explanation of how matters of degree can change the kind of things that result. As Raz explains, something can (more or less) be a kind of a thing, a bad example of that thing, or no example at all, depending upon the degrees to which it instantiates the ideal standards defining that kind of thing. Relaxation, for example, might be an important ideal standard for defining what counts as a good holiday. Thus, as one's 'holiday' becomes less relaxing it becomes (in this respect) less of a holiday. If it becomes extremely stressful it may be no holiday at all. Indeed, it may become something from which one very much needs a holiday.[20]

The massive amplification of views and issues resulting from the revolutionary 'efficiency' of communication Dorsey describes has generated a very different landscape of social discourse. It has resulted, for example, in a sea of misinformation, giving special traction to widespread confusion and rejection of truth, both scientific and moral, of the most important kinds, such as the rejection of science about climate change and the rapid destruction of the planet. The amplification has also brought about the perverse celebration of many moral horrors and tragedies by enabling a community to normalize them and promote them as cool lifestyles or forms of entertainment, thereby obscuring focus on their (otherwise loud and clear) disvalue. A striking recent example is given by Forrest Stuart in *Ballad of the Bullet: Gangs, Drill Music, and the Power of Online*

19. Dean Cocking and Jeroen van den Hoven, *Evil Online* (New York: Wiley, 2018).

20. Raz's gives the example of a 'holiday' to provide the explanation, and we run with it here. See Wallace, *The Practice of Value*, p. 32, note 18. In our example of the 'Hendrix effect', the kind of musical communication provided by electric guitar was expanded and transformed by (his use of) the distorting effects of amplification.

Infamy.[21] In this case, gang violence and ghetto life are celebrated and sold to the huge market for 'public voyeurism' related to such horrors and tragedies that has been enabled online. ('Drill music' refers to the music the gangs use during their gun violence.[22])

Doubling Down on 'Selfing'

The contemporary age of the 'selfie' is spectacular icing on the cake of our recent centuries of self.[23] We now, for example, talk about ourselves far more as we live online. Figures vary, but all agree the increase is significant (some sources say the increase is around twice as much, others say it is around fifty percent).[24] It is not, however, just that as *individuals* we talk more about ourselves or that we are engaged in more presentations of self. The preoccupation with self is crucially enabled by the fact that it is a *community* of people talking about one another's talk about themselves. In fact, it is a global community normalizing discourse that is overly engaged in reflecting back to one another everyone's talk about themselves. As Joey Borelli (@joeybtoonz) joked, "Narcissism used to be a bad thing!?"[25] As a global community, we are driving ourselves and one another back into ourselves and doubling down on 'selfing'.

Actor Jack Nicholson observed that everybody has a problem with celebrity. In *Evil Online*, we also quote some interesting observations from actor/

21. Forrest Stuart, *Ballad of the Bullet: Gangs, Drill Music and the Power of Online Infamy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2020).

22. Dorsey queries our suggestion that various extreme evils, such as the proliferation of terrorism or proanorexia sites, are not just minor dark alleys of the internet (p. 9). He notes, using some figures we cite of the staggering explosion of overall Internet traffic, that these evils may only represent a minor part of overall Internet traffic. Fair enough. Nevertheless, of course, it is true and far more importantly so, that evils such as terrorism, harmful pseudo-science, child porn, and so on have exploded with the advent of the Internet. Moreover, as we describe in the book, there are many extreme evils that have been especially facilitated by the Internet. None need in themselves, of course, count for much as a proportion of overall Internet traffic. But the ongoing relentless explosion of degrees and kinds of such extreme moral horrors (filling newspapers, books, investigative stories every other day) is remarkable and alarming. In any case, the prevalence across social life of the doubling down on selfing we highlight is certainly a notable part of the core business of Internet life.

23. The BBC documentary series *The Century of the Self* provides many insights about the rise of our self-preoccupation over the past 100 years. See *The Century of the Self*, BBC and RDF Television, 2002.

24. See, for example, Courtney Seiter, 'The Psychology of Social Media: Why We Like, Comment, and Share Online', Buffer, 10 August 2016, https://buffer.com/resources/psychology-of-social-media/.

25. See joeybtoonz, 'Narcissists and #SOCIALMEDIA', YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/c/joeybtoonz [accessed 20 January 2021].

filmmaker Clint Eastwood on fame and how, with fame, due to everyone relating to a famous person as their famous image, it becomes impossible to observe, much less relate to, people just being themselves. The world of engagement with others becomes largely reduced to interacting with their celebrity self that is reflected back to them in the eyes and behavior of others.[26] Thus, others are unable to see and interact with the famous person and the famous person does not get to see and interact with them. For an actor, this is a problem since they are no longer presented with a variety of human expressions and behaviors from which they can learn how to act. All of us, however, increasingly preoccupied with our virtual self-presentations on social media have inherited much the same problem. Whether about our fame or not about fame at all, preoccupation with (virtual) images of ourselves overly shapes our self-expression, communication, and shared activity with one another.

The main features driving our preoccupation with self across our major social media platforms are the dominance of comparative-competitive connections fueled by likes, clicks, and views[27]; the hyper-personalization enabled by the use of artificial intelligence and 'big data' to microtarget and influence the behavior of individuals; the dominance of connections of weak ties with one another (commonly seeming to substitute for strong ones)[28]; the objectification of one another, marginalizing and denying subjectivity with reductions of one another to images and texts[29]; and the business model driven by big data about what makes us tick, manipulating and commodifying us, selling us to those wanting to influence us 24/7.[30]

The recent book *Grandstanding: The Use and Abuse of Moral Talk*[31] provides an excellent example of one notable trend in which we are doubling down on selfing online and as a result compounding our problems with foggy capacities for value appreciation. The 'grandstander' (much like the 'virtue-signaler') has

26. Interview with Andrew Denton, *Enough Rope*, ABC Television, Australia, 24 November 2008.

27. *Some* measures have been taken to redress the problem, such as the removal of publicly displaying how many 'likes' everyone gets on Instagram.

28. On 'strong and weak ties' and an interesting discussion of the importance of 'weak' ties, e.g., for social comparison, support, and the spread of ideas and information, see Malcolm R. Parks, 'Weak and Strong Tie Relationships', Wiley Online Library, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/9781118540190.wbeic041 [accessed 1 March 2022].

29. See, for example, Martha Nussbaum's discussion of objectification online, 'Internet Misogyny and Objectification', in *The Offensive Internet* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010).

30. These features have been widely canvassed. They are the main worries about living online presented, for instance, in the film *The Social Dilemma*, dir. Jeff Orlowski (Boulder, CO: Exposure Labs, 2020).

31. Justin Tosi and Brandon Warmke, *Grandstanding: The Use and Abuse of Moral Talk* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

their positive self-image as the righteous espouser of certain values as their primary governing concern rather than the value they are grandstanding about. The case provides a good example of how the dominance of comparative-competitive connections that drives online preoccupation with self is commonly played out and seems especially interesting for our purposes here, since (of course) there cannot be any question about whether values are present and on the radar for the user—the grandstander is grandstanding about them. Nevertheless, by grandstanding about them, their own self-promotion becomes the governing value, in turn marginalizing appreciation of the value about which they are grandstanding.

There is obviously a lot of grandstanding going on across our social media platforms and in all sorts of ways.[32] If we look, for example, at our own field on Twitter (the community of 'academic twitter') there is a lot of 'humblebragging' going on: 'I am so proud to be invited to contribute', and so on. In fact, it is remarkable how many of us are incredibly honored to be who we are on account of some recent book, appointment, recognition, or association we are claiming to be 'honoring'. The case of grandstanding also draws our attention to another way in which amplification online distorts and changes the messages we take on. For the amplification affords not only more attention to the specific content one is ostensibly communicating. The amplification also brings far more attention to oneself. The person sending the message (or their profile) is also amplified. As a result, the messages, or kind of thing that becomes the main concern of the communication, often changes. The message of the grandstander was supposed to be, for example, that value *X* needs to be far more appreciated. The grandstander, however, embracing or caught up in the amplification afforded by the medium, is now focused on grandstanding. Due to a combination of features concerning the design of the medium, such as the amplification of attention to virtual images of self, and features of the milieu, such as the amplification of competitive-comparative self/other understandings, the amplification effects of the medium go well beyond amplifying the content of information or ideas in a message.[33] Indeed, for the grandstander, the content of the message about value

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32. While Tosi and Warmke note how grandstanding has been around forever, they also recognize some ways in which the Internet has given it special traction, such as by pushing us to extremes to 'stand out in saturated waters' and how this changes the message. See, e.g., Tosi and Warmke, 'Preface', *Grandstanding,* p. xi.

33. There are many features providing traction to such problems of polarizing and extreme and intolerant views flourishing online, such as filter bubbles and echo chambers. Most significant of all, we argue, is the absence of so much of the moral terrain and language we have built upon this terrain to enable value appreciation, such as much of the rich and nuanced suite of face-to-face communications we have developed over many thousands of years to help inform and navigate our interactions with one another.

X needing to be better appreciated now takes a back seat to the preoccupation with self (with promoting virtual and virtuous images of oneself) that is also 'amplified' by the medium.

As Herbert Simon sharply observed, the only thing that is scarce when information is abundant is attention.[34] Furthermore, how much attention one gets determines the value of that attention, hence there is a massive positional arms race for attention online. Without building a presence online, increasing the number of Twitter followers, putting oneself 'out there', grandstanding, saying outrageous things, or publishing papers that will 'shit-stir',[35] one will not be visible or will be far less visible in the sea of others who are already so heavily engaged in such self-presentations and promotion. In focusing on the parameters of online attention there is a shift away from tracking, toward getting attention and away from the things that warrant attention. In this way, intrinsic motivations concerned with pursuing or promoting value are 'crowded out' by instrumental rewards such as likes, views, and followers.[36] It may even become more difficult to get valuing started. For instance, in a large survey among young people regarding the most popular career they wanted to pursue, a remarkable shift has occurred in the last decade: doctor, pilot, scientist, and musician have been replaced by 'influencer' and 'vlogger'.[37] Here the indicia of social recognition and measurable attention for activity comes first, the attention 'cart' (increasingly) comes before the value 'horse', and our transcendence to becoming valued beings or to becoming persons gets sidelined from the very start.

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34. See, Herbert A. Simon, *Designing Organizations for an Information-Rich World* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971) pp. 37–52. Simon says, '[I]n an information-rich world, the wealth of information means a dearth of something else: a scarcity of whatever it is that information consumes. What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of its recipients. Hence a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention and a need to allocate that attention efficiently among the overabundance of information sources that might consume it' (pp. 40–41).

35. See Nicholas Agar, 'On the Moral Obligation to Stop Shit-Stirring', *Psyche*, December 2020.

36. Robert Frank, for instance, provides compelling demonstrations of how these positional arms races are socially wasteful and alienate us from what is valuable. See Robert H. Frank, *The Darwin Economy: Liberty, Competition, and the Common Good* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011). See also the work of Sam Bowles for an analysis of how external rewards and pecuniary incentives for activities, where there were initially intrinsic motivations and moral reasons, undermine and crowd out the latter motives and reasons by being associated with financial consequences that are not internally related to those valued practices. Samuel Bowles, *The Moral Economy: Why Good Incentives Are No Substitute for Good Citizens* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

37. See Chloe Taylor, 'Kids Now Dream of Being Professional YouTubers Rather Than Astronauts, Study Finds', CNBC, 19 July 2019, https://www.cnbc.com/2019/07/19/more-children-dream-of-being-youtubers-than-astronauts-lego-says.html.

The main game of Internet use is the pursuit of social life online. Social connections online are heavily influenced by a cluster of features that compound undesirable forms of selfing, such as 'weak ties' substituting for 'strong ties' to one another, the personalization of filter bubbles and echo chambers, the absence and obfuscation of subjectivity and of the navigational support of a suite of moral guides and forms of censure. The pursuit of social life online is now the primary way through which many pursue social life. The pursuit of social life online is also now the primary form of Internet use and so responsible for a very notable slice of the staggering amount of overall Internet traffic. Thus, the worries about the social evils involved in doubling down on selfing as we increasingly live online are of pervasive concern.[38]

In stark contrast to Dorsey, Philip Kitcher suggests we might not go far enough in characterizing the dangers of living online. He recognizes that many of the concerns we raise in discussing particular cases, pathologies, and trends are 'bigger-picture' concerns about the 'potential for huge damage to human lives and to human society' (p. 20). He says, however, we could have gone further across two fronts. First, in regard to the damage done to knowledge and understanding. We note in *Evil Online* some of the revolutionary epistemic benefits of the Internet. We also, as Kitcher wants to highlight, describe some of the great epistemic threats of the Internet, such as to the development of the 'reasonably well-informed citizen' needed for democracy to work and the flourishing of all kinds of pseudo-science. Kitcher is right to ask, however, 'What does it profit a species to gain the entire wisdom of Wikipedia, and lose both the best (or least bad?) form of government and its planet as well?' (p. 19).

Kitcher shares our concern about limits and distortions in the capacities of individuals for good judgement and also points to the dependence of the individual's virtue upon society and the (long history of) development of moral educative social practices:

> We are able on occasion to recognize the goals and aspirations of others, and to modify our own actions so that they harmonize. Yet this ability

38. Dorsey also takes issue (pp. 10–11) with our running together of the moral and prosocial in *Evil Online*. We can, of course, distinguish between the moral and the prosocial. Indeed, sometimes we must, such as when the immorality of an actual social world's stance on something needs to be exposed. Even here, however, the stance is immoral because it is not *really* prosocial at all, such as with all forms of prejudice. Dorsey is pointing to how the moral and social can come apart by pointing to how (more) ideal moral worlds and actual social worlds can come apart. More ideal social worlds, however, will, of course, not merely be social by conventional standards but by moral ones. We assume (moral) ideals of the 'social' when we run the moral and prosocial together, as do discussions concerning the various social psychology experiments we also wanted to include and address in our analysis of the immorality and corruption of normal people.

> frequently breaks down, and we thwart the intentions of people with whom we causally interact. The moral project amplifies our responsiveness. The shortcomings of our evolved psychology are partially remedied by the social working out of accepted patterns of conduct.[39]

He goes on to provide excellent extensive and detailed discussion to help clarify our account of moral fog by distinguishing various ways in which moral fog can be generated and obfuscate valuing. He describes two fundamental, general kinds of mistakes: stopping to reflect when one should not stop to do so, and not stopping to reflect when one should. These correspond to a fundamental, general kind of discernment that he says we need for clearing our fog and exercising good judgement: discerning between those cases where it is acceptable to act on habit (or the attitudes we already have and would act on unreflectively) and those cases where we should stop to reflect and revise our habits and standing attitudes (p. 25). He then unpacks what such discernment would involve by describing a decision procedure made by 'appropriately constituted advisory boards' (p. 27). As to how this social method for making better judgements helps the individual, he suggests individuals can simulate how they 'imagine a properly conducted social inquiry would go'. In turn, how well we can do this, he advises, 'will depend on a number of sensitivities', such as our ability to discern options, to tell who will be affected by the options, and to appreciate how they will be affected (p. 27).

We certainly agree that we need to clarify the varieties of moral fog and how they may or may not be cleared. In chapter 4 of *Evil Online*, we describe varieties of moral fog that are generated by different but widely shared features of our nature, such as our learning limitations and vulnerabilities, garden-variety vices and weaknesses, the force of our need to position ourselves well, and for intimate connections. Here we respond to Kitcher's suggestions for further clarity about our account of moral fog by describing how it is sourced in the conditions of subjectivity and contingency of human nature and then further compounded by a variety of 'falsifying veils' generated by other widely shared aspects of self and of relations with others and the world around us.

These sources of fog, we suggest, underpin and explain many of the ways described by Kitcher that we can fail to appreciate value. Thus, for example, the foundational limits and vulnerabilities presented by our subjectivity of focus, along with our contingent possibilities for the exercise of such focus, shape our capacities to appreciate 'when to look and when to leap', to discern the options that are available before us, to discern all of those who will be affected by the options, and to properly appreciate how they will be affected.

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39. Kitcher, *Losing Your Way in the Fog*, p. 26.

Kitcher also suggests we could go further in characterizing the damage done to quality of life, especially our intimate lives, where our lives are increasingly conducted on screens. In *Evil Online*, we highlight the damage done to quality of life with the collapse of the concurrent, plural worlds of public and private life and the resultant many losses of value and forms of valuing. Again, however, we agree that much more can be said to articulate the nature of the broader impoverishment of our lives as we live 'on screens'. Thus, as we further describe below, one should note some of the large-scale normative losses that arise from the reduction of social spaces online to ones of concealment *or* exposure and some important forms of valuing within intimacy that are lost or perverted online.

Many put our problems online down to unfortunate 'growing pains' from which we will evolve. Others worry we will not get there because they see the danger of becoming hopelessly addicted puppets of algorithms and a milieu created by and designed to serve extraordinarily powerful corporate and political masters.[40] Problems such as addiction, commodification, and manipulation are certainly important current problems, part of the picture of moral regress online. The problems, however, for the future of life online are deeper. Even if we beat addiction and disposed of commodification, manipulation, and a host of other evils online, additional and special problems facing our capacities for value appreciation remain.

The Social Dependence of Valuing

Moral Education and Valuing

Joseph Raz argues there is a very tight dependence of values upon social practice: without relevant social practices (at least somewhere, sometime) the associated values could not exist at all.[41] Christine Korsgaard argues that it is not because of our shared values that we have moral reasons in regard one another, but because of our shared nature, our shared nature as valuers, beings capable of conferring value. Thus, for instance, she says the appreciation of natural beauty need not depend upon social practices supporting such appreciation: 'I think you could be dazzled by a spectacular sunset even if it is the only one you ever

40. As mentioned above, this sort of concern is the focus of the film *The Social Dilemma*. For a more nuanced, comprehensive, and beautifully made documentary on the social evils of life online, see *The Cleaners*, dir. Hans Block, Moritz Riesewieck (Gebrueder Beetz Filmproduktion, 2018).

41. Wallace, *The Practice of Value*, pp 15–37.

saw, or if no one in your culture talked about such things'.[42] However, even if we agree with Korsgaard that it is capacities within us rather than forces external to us, like God or culture, that create value, these capacities are limited and vulnerable. We can all agree that for 'quality of consciousness' we invariably need to live in worlds where morally educative social practices help us appreciate value, rather than the contrary.

Iris Murdoch describes how we can be struck by beauty despite our problems. She describes how spotting a kestrel in flight hijacked her consciousness. In Murdoch's case, being struck by beauty took her beyond her preoccupation with self:

> I am looking out my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking about the other matter it seems less important. And of course this is something which we may also do deliberately: give attention to nature in order to clear our minds of selfish care.[43]

On the other hand, many years ago on a talk show in Australia, a pilot of light planes was describing how he and others would routinely aim and fly their propellers through wedge-tail eagles—for fun. The pilot's story was, of course, a confession. He was highlighting his remarkable lack of appreciation of value, along with that of many comrades in guilt. His world back then was one where the beauty of a wedge-tail eagle in flight was not lost on people. However, it was far less valued, or less clearly so. It was common, for example, for farmers to shoot them to protect their livestock back in the day. Killing them for 'sport' or fun, therefore, would not have been quite the psychological stretch it would be (for most) in more recent times. Falsifying influences, as Murdoch describes, often obscure our perception of value, and in this case they do so for the pilot's being struck by the beauty of the wedge-tail eagle.

Immanuel Kant championed our capacities of reason to appreciate value irrespective of our inclinations (whether cooperative or not) and irrespective of direction from others, social practices, and the world around us. In a well-known description, he describes how such appreciation (the goodwill) would 'shine like

42. Wallace, pp. 78–79.
43. Murdoch, p. 88.

a jewel for itself, as something having its full worth in itself'.[44] As well, however, Kant thought that self-conceit (our giving primacy to our 'inclinations' over the moral law) was ubiquitous and significant across human nature.[45] If we are to have any hope in transcending this level of self-conceit, therefore, it seems hard to deny that we can very much do without social practices that celebrate it and the help of robust social practices to help us rise above it.

Moral education has long been a neglected area of philosophical study. This neglect has continued, and now that we find ourselves immersed in the digital age moral education faces significant new problems.[46] These problems arise both because of the fog created by limits and distortions for giving values a presence online and because of the fog created for value appreciation even where users have undertaken significant education regarding the presence of value and disvalue online, such as value for identifying online conduct as bullying or dishonest. It is common, for example, that bullying is undertaken by 'friends' of the victim but that the friends, while quite well-educated about cyberbullying, nevertheless remain relatively clueless in identifying their own conduct as such, often until it is has ended in tragedy and it is all too late.[47]

One of the notable 'falsifying veils' driving our moral fog online are varied aspects of self that drive our long-standing problems with distinguishing what is real from relatively poor imitations, illusions, and substitutes. In *Evil Online*, we describe some of these problems and how we can get lost in such worlds, confusing the virtual and the real. We have always, more or less, created and

44. Immanuel Kant, *The Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: HarperCollins, 1964).

45. On our 'radical evil', see Immanuel Kant, 'Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason', in *Immanuel Kant: Religion and Rational Authority*, trans. and ed. A. W. Wood and G. Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

46. In their recent article on new challenges facing moral education in the digital age, Matthew Dennis and Tom Harrison open with a brief, but compelling, survey of neglect. They note, for example, that only a single article had previously appeared on the topic of moral education in the 'ever-changing space' of the digital age and that little philosophical reflection has been done on how promoting human flourishing might guide educating for our 'data driven' digital lives. They do suggest also that things seem to be picking up. See Matthew Dennis and Tom Harrison, 'Unique Challenges for the 21st Century: Online Technology and Virtue Education', *Journal of Moral Education*, 2020.

47. For extended discussion of such cases, see Dean Cocking, 'Friendship Online', *Oxford Handbook of Digital Ethics*, ed. Carissa Véliz (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). Education and awareness-raising about other values and disvalues online have also been shown to spectacularly fail to transmit to appreciating those values when online. So, for example, while people have been well-educated on various privacy risks and could demonstrate as much if asked or tested, many nevertheless act as if they are relatively clueless when they get online. See, B. Debatin et al., 'Facebook and Online Privacy: Attitudes, Behaviours and Unintended Consequences', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 15, no. 1 (October 2009), pp. 83–108.

lived in 'virtual realities' of a sort, at least worlds well short of the reality or value we claim for them. This can be simply due to our limits of knowledge and understanding or because of the sort of falsifying aspects of self that Murdoch has in mind. So, for example, we pretend a relationship or work-life is good, or good enough, when our anxieties and insecurities are both fueling and being compounded by the illusion. The worry, then, is not just that we might lose sight of realities (moral and otherwise) by living too much in virtual worlds that fail to give these realities sufficient presence. The worry is also that we might want to do so, just as we have often and long wanted to do so in our preonline worlds. Correcting our focus toward reality, exposing the shortcomings of our lives, is often the last thing people want to do. Virtual realities online promise spectacular new ways forward to fuel and compound such desires to deny reality and create 'falsifying veils'.

Our traditional worlds have long been dysfunctional in many notable ways. Approximating personhood has long faced serious, often insurmountable, obstacles. Mortal, much less moral, needs and legitimate claims have been ignored and violated (often on monumental scales). Even in our better sociopolitical worlds, generational poverty, along with drug and alcohol problems and family dysfunction, are common. Laws, courts, and policing are often hijacked and corrupted by power, self-interest, prejudice and shortsightedness, and social and educational services are often unavailable or hard to access for many marginalized groups.

It is important not to lose sight of the dysfunction of our traditional worlds. While online worlds often compound problems of dysfunction (frequently celebrating them as in the case of 'drill music' abovementioned), they can also provide some respite or ways out of traditional world problems. As Dale Dorsey points out, for example, the advent of living online has provided the platform for many victimized and marginalized people and groups to fight back against some of the dysfunction in our traditional worlds. He describes, for instance, some of the great successes of the #MeToo movement (p. 13) and concludes that we must judge the movement to be a very good thing overall. It is, of course, a great good to be able to get some offenders to justice who otherwise would have been able to avoid it and, as Dorsey describes, to have made some significant social changes to long-standing injustices.

Online worlds have provided some important new ways out of the moral fog of our traditional lives and worlds. As we have described here and in *Evil Online*, many aspects of our traditional lives and worlds have long enabled doubling-down on selfing and undermined various values and our appreciation of them. The great successes of the #MeToo movement have redressed some of these failures of our traditional worlds. Notwithstanding such successes, new and fundamental worries about 'doubling-down on selfing' and for value

appreciation remain as we increasingly live online. Indeed, even in the case of the #MeToo movement, while it may be good overall, it is not at all clear that the broader culture of online shaming and blaming, freewheeling from the regulatory effects of long-standing laws, norms, and social practices, has been a good thing overall.[48]

Dependence upon Intimates and Society

Aristotle argues that our virtue is socially dependent in two broad ways: upon the help we get from our intimate relations and that from our broader sociopolitical situation. Friendship provides his central illustration of the former. We need friends, he argues, for self-knowledge: 'If, then, it is pleasant to know oneself, and it is not possible to know this without having someone else for a friend, the self-sufficing man will require friendship in order to know himself'.[49]

Second, toward the end of his discussion on moral education, he describes how, even if we have been brought up well to appreciate value, our problems of self, such as our selfishness, will not be extinguished and will need the ongoing support of a broader social system to help reign in these less perfect aspects of ourselves.[50] At this point, he says, our virtue also depends upon the state, and so we need to move to politics and think about what the state must do to meet our needs. If we are to transcend various widely shared weaknesses and vice, then we will need the help of others and our environment, across both our personal and public lives to do so—in particular, through the provision of well-developed morally educative social practices.

Intimate relations, for example (notably friendship), typically enable shared activity that is especially loose and unstructured in a relational context where we are deeply accepted and strongly connected. In so doing, (good) intimate relations provide remedy to some primary wellsprings of our self-conscious anxieties and the falsifying veils they produce. Our strong ties of intimacy provide social spaces for relaxation, experimentation, broad play, and creativity about how to be and act and they deliver some solace from isolation, alienation, and loneliness. In addition, various state actors, functions, and institutions—such as teachers, laws and regulations, and welfare and health services—provide morally educative social practices involving guidance, support, and 'carrots and

48. See, for example, Jon Ronson's book on the carnage, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed?* (London: Picador, 2015).

49. Aristotle, *Magna Moralia* (Franklin Classics, 2018), pp. 1213a20–13b.

50. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, book 10 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 1179b39–79b46.

sticks' to help us see through or beyond falsifying veils of self, such as ignorance and self-conceit.

Various writers emphasize the need for social practices and conventions allowing practice, play, experimentation, mistakes, and creativity so that we might develop ourselves and our capacities to engage with others and to contribute generally in worthwhile ways.[51] The pursuit of a worthwhile life involves a lot to experience and figure out, none of which we can do if we cannot do the playing, practicing, trying out, and so on that is required to find and create what we are looking for. We need to ask, for example, Is this right or good? Is another option better? Korsgaard presents Kant's take on the story of Eve and her decision to eat the apple, highlighting that for Kant the story illustrates how we are beings who can define our own ends. We can choose our own way without being 'tied to any single one like other animals'. [52] Thus, irrespective of what our senses tell us, what we are told by others, what is handed down to us by God or culture, is that we can figure things out for ourselves and set our own ends.

Well, we try. However, we must act, engage in choices, and value assessments that give rise to reasons for us, not just, or even so much, as Korsgaard claims, because we are self-conscious beings. Gods do not lack for self-consciousness. Gods, however, do not have to engage in trial and error, try out different interests, relationships, ways of life in the hope of figuring out what matters, discovering and creating value and how we might hold on to it. They need not try to make sense of their situation and come up with a good plan with supporting reasons to deal with it. Gods are self-aware, but they don't have to ask if 'eating the apple' might be permissible, wonder if a better way is possible, and (with some help and luck) come to an appreciation of value. They already know. We, on the other hand, must engage in the 'practicing' and so on, and in getting help from others and our settings, because we are limited in perspective and possibilities for understanding and appreciating value, not simply, or even primarily, because we are self-conscious beings.

Concealment or Exposure Online

In addition to support within our personal lives, such as within friendships, we have also long developed valuable complex and nuanced public social spaces that help support and navigate various expressions of our less-than-autonomous

51. See, for example, J. S. Mill's 'experiments in living' in J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, vol. 18, *The Collected Works of J. S. Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), pp. 260–67.

52. Korsgaard quotes Kant's take on the story of 'Adam and Eve' as the 'first act of reason', Wallace, *The Practice of Value*, p. 83.

selves. This complexity and nuance of public self-expression and shared activity, however, is largely flatlined on our social media platforms. Our discussion in chapter 3 of *Evil Online* highlights the limits and distortions that the online collapse of the public and private realms presents for the expression of a range of values (such as privacy, autonomy, civility, and intimacy). We cannot expose ourselves in various ways online and expect to have, say, our intimacy or privacy respected by others. In our traditional worlds, however, we have developed social practices over many thousands of years to help us do so, such as by 'putting things aside' or 'social forgetfulness' or 'polite disregard' and other ways to shift the focus of our attention from one another's 'exposure'.

As Thomas Nagel[53] and Ervin Goffman[54] have shown, such public spaces for self-expression are important in many ways. For instance, this kind of nuance and plurality in how we may engage in communication helps us to flag and pick out the attitudes and conduct for which we might be more and less responsible (i.e., the attitudes and conduct that we have more or less voluntarily chosen to present for engagement). Moreover, as we describe in *Evil Online*, our capacities to trust one another often crucially rely upon our having access to the rich, plural, and sometimes conflicting aspects of one another made available by our long inhabiting the nuanced worlds of dynamic face-to-face communication and shared activity in our traditional worlds. Robert Frank, for example, has provided significant evidence of how our perception of commitment and trust in one another depends upon our having such engagement.[55]

These different kinds of public self-expression, and our use of social practices for communication in regard to them, are also crucial for our developing expressions of self and identity. When younger, for instance, we can practice and 'try out' expressions of self in the public realm and make mistakes without too much attention and condemnation. Online, however, we must choose to conceal ourselves altogether or choose to risk exposing ourselves to significant (including negative) public attention and comment.[56]

Carissa Véliz focuses on our discussion in chapter 3 of the moral fog caused by this collapse online of the plural worlds of the public and private realms. In particular, she focuses on our discussion of self-presentation online, how the

53. Thomas Nagel, 'Concealment and Exposure', *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 27, no. 1 (Winter), 1998.

54. Ervin Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York, Doubleday Anchor, 1959).

55. See, chapter 3 of *Evil Online* and R. H. Frank, *What Price the Moral High Ground? Ethical Dilemmas in Competitive Environments* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).

56. We are imagining here the lack of social practises to 'put things aside' in online public spaces, not talking to a close friend one to one online. In our traditional worlds, of course, people may not 'put things aside' and we may just as well be subject to humiliation and abuse.

illusion of being able to self-present on 'one's own terms' gets special traction online, and how other self-presentations get crowded out or are unavailable. Véliz wants to argue that privacy and control over self-presentation, while closely related, are not the same thing. We agree. After all, one of the main cases we highlight is where respect for privacy can be shown in regard to those presentations of self about which we *do not* have much control. We give an example of being out with a friend, 'bumping' into an 'ex' and their new lover, having some awkward losses of autonomy and exposure of private feelings, and the friend (and the ex) helping out to support our autonomy and respect our privacy. Hence, privacy and control over self-presentation are not the same thing since what is private here concerns feelings over which one does not exercise much control.

Véliz, however, presents the example, and another of ours, to conclude: 'It seems like Cocking and van den Hoven are equating control over self-presentation and privacy. [. . .] As long as we support and do not interfere with people's self-presentation, we are respecting their privacy' (p. 33). As we describe in the example, however, we are interfering with the presentations of awkwardness in order to respect privacy (we suggest by making distracting small talk, wrapping things up quickly and not undertaking more intrusive questioning). Véliz sums up her view of the case this way:

> When, in a social setting, one catches a glimpse of someone's involuntary and revealing gestures that betray some feeling they wish to hide, and one acts with discretion, thereby supporting the person's self-presentation and autonomy, they save their blushes but they are not protecting privacy. Therefore, when a friend encounters her ex and his new lover, and appears so anxious that everyone present notices her negative emotions, to not remark on her nervousness is an act of kindness, but her privacy with respect to her emotions is lost once everyone has noticed her nervousness. Of course, one could make her lose even more privacy by talking to others about this event, but merely refraining from talking about her anxiety to her does not make her regain the privacy she lost with respect to others, her ex, and her ex's lover. (p. 36)

Yes, *some* of her privacy is lost. But it is too swift to leave it at that. It makes an enormous difference how we respond to the exposure—in particular, whether we focus on it and make it our business or we set it aside since it is not any of our business. If we catch someone in a private moment, some of their privacy has thereby been compromised. How we respond can make it much worse or better. We can focus on it and compound the compromising of their privacy, make it a much bigger problem, or we can set it aside as not any of our business

and minimize whatever damage is done. As in our example (and Véliz seems to accept), we can respect privacy and minimize the damage by making small talk and wrapping things up quickly in the circumstances.

Véliz suggests that we need to change our culture of overexposure online, of relentless self-presentations. We certainly have a culture of overexposure online, as the 'age of the selfie' attests. On the other hand, we also have a culture of over-concealment as we live online. Our choices are forced, we either expose or conceal, and as a result, much of our rich and broad suite of values and valuing is lost or distorted. Véliz suggests we need a great deal more concealment to better protect privacy and to take away people's control over their self-presentations by changing related conventions and social practices in two ways: by 'having different platforms for different purposes (separating the pursuit of truth, such as in academic platforms, from other kinds of pursuits' (p. 42) and by the presentation of fictitious characters online (and known by users to be fictitious). Since people's roles have been cast for them in these ways, she points out, people will both be better protected against privacy violations and no longer have such control over how they self-present online.

We may well be better off online with far more concealment, given that the choice otherwise risks massive overexposure. Nevertheless, it remains true that to the extent that we live in such worlds, we are far worse off in regards the wide range of our values we have now lost or have distorted on account of our not being able to 'expose ourselves in public' in various ways. There are, of course, many different platforms for many different purposes, and it would be good to make clearer to one and all those platforms that are concerned with truth and those with fiction. As we have been arguing, however, this really is a notable example of the problem (i.e., the fog for our capacities for appreciating reality and value).

Similarly, it might be good to change our conventions for self-presentation online by adopting fictitious characters about which we all are clear, but our capacities for such clarity are the problem. Many users have, in fact, long been engaged in online platforms where they play fictitious characters and where everyone knows that they are the online worlds of avatars. In an early groundbreaking book, *Second Lives: A Journey through Virtual Worlds*, Tim Guest provides in-depth interviews with many users in these worlds. One of the most striking and generally true phenomena shown is how easily and completely many users identify with their fictitious 'second selves'.[57] The fictional nature of many second selves, and everyone being utterly clear about this fact, does not stop them becoming many users' *first* selves. Notoriously, quite generally, as we discuss in

57. Tim Guest, *Second Lives: A Journey Through Virtual Worlds* (New York: Random House, 2008).

Evil Online, and above, we have trouble distinguishing the virtual from the real. The worry, then, is some further doubling down on selfing by compounding our fog about reality and illusion.[58]

Our self-presentation and experience of one another in the form of physical human beings has long provided the territory upon which we have built a very sophisticated moral language—a moral language involving a complex suite of physical verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Virtual mediums give limited and distorted traction to this language. As a result, a significant and distinctive problem has emerged for moral understanding, education, and progress in the digital age. The problem is not *just* that we are trying to educate individuals for the practice of values in social worlds where these values are not yet well established. The deeper problem is that with the change in the territory upon which we have developed moral understanding, much of the shared activity and communication that grounds our appreciation of values is absent or misrepresented in these new worlds. Thus, many values and important dimensions of our valuing cannot be well established online. Moral fog is compounded online, both because moral realities and our valuing of them have limited and distorted presence and because, even if present, we are 'doubling down' on selfing and thereby further undermining our capacities to appreciate value.

Kitcher describes the impoverishment of our relational fabric with the loss of 'standing together with one another' in the face of great difficulty as we live online. A general kind of case, which is often not practical online but which has long provided significant help in counteracting some of the corrosive effect life events can bring for value appreciation offline, falls under the heading of just 'being there' with one another. For example, a close friend suffers the devastating loss of a loved one. Nothing much can be said or done to redress the tragedy. However, though one may not do or say much at all, much comfort and solace from the horrendous loneliness, dislocation, and despair the tragedy brings can be delivered by simply 'being there' for the friend. In Australia, for instance, Aboriginal communities have long practiced what they call 'deep listening'[59] for such occasions when nothing much can be said or done to undo terrible damage. What can be done, however, is to be there with someone by deeply listening (without judgement or comment) and thereby provide the psychic space of their not being alone with their tragedy and perhaps help them give some expression

58. More generally, as Reverend Dimmesdale notes in *The Scarlet Letter*, we 'cannot wear two hats too long without becoming confused as to which is the real'. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlett Letter, A Romance* (Boston, MA: Ticknor, Reed and Fields, 1850).

59. This practice of deep listening is called Dadirri. See, for example, 'Deep Listening (Dadirri)', Creative Spirits, https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/education/deep-listening-dadirri [accessed 8 March 2022].

to their trauma.[60] While the loss cannot be resolved, the sort of 'standing together' Kitcher has in mind can be achieved. In so doing, 'being there' for one another provides some antidote to the devastation of a person's valuing capacities that often results from such losses.

We also create valuable social spaces of just being there with one another in various more mundane, everyday ways, such as watching television together or walking in a park. As noted above, good friendships present a paradigm of relatively open, loose, and tolerant social spaces, enabling, for instance, relaxation, day-dreaming, and creative play. In so doing, they provide some proof against some of our 'anxiety-ridden self-consciousness', such as about being lonely, alienated, and disconnected. Just being there with one another serves the same purposes and, in turn, our being able to think beyond our (relatively small-minded) cares or being able to think about them but without the added anxieties of being alone with them.

Conclusion

Moral education and progress in the digital age faces some fundamental and new challenges. Central practices assisting us out of the fog, that help us 'unself' by supporting the dependence of our capacities to appreciate value upon others and the world around us, are largely missing online. As a result, we argued in *Evil Online,* that many of the terrible things flourishing online do so in a surprising way: people with 'an absence of malice', rampant self-interest, criminality, or mental impairment, otherwise morally competent and inclined, can behave appallingly online because their capacities to see value and disvalue become (even more) fogged up. Normative stakes are now obscured that would otherwise (in comparative traditional world settings, such as for the pursuit of friendship) register loud and clear.

There is much work to be done in articulating the nature of our values and how we can give them presence online.[61] Murdoch and Marx, however, offer important guidance by getting us to notice the different, but very widely shared, ways in which we fail to see value or disvalue, even if it right is in front of us, and by directing us to the culprit: the falsifying veils of self, others, and the

60. For some powerful examples, see Judy Atkinson's talk, 'The Value of Deep Listening—Aboriginal Gift to the Nation', TEDxSydney, 16 June 2017, https://tedxsydney.com/talk/the-value-of-deep-listening-the-aboriginal-gift-to-the-nation-judy-atkinson/

61. At the end of *Evil Online*, we make the call for better value-sensitive design of our online spaces. Dorsey gives the example of Reddit, which is one good illustration of better value-sensitive design.

world around us. The future for value-sensitive design of life online, therefore, requires focus well beyond identifying our values and giving them a presence in online settings. Indeed, the design focus needs to be primarily on our capacities to appreciate value and identifying practices to enable them. To undertake this, we have argued, we need to better understand our problems with value appreciation, and we have argued that the problem of moral fog presents one of these foundational problems.

In addition to the need to focus more on designing online settings to provide social practices to better enable the *appreciation* of realities and values, we have also suggested that many values, or important aspects of them, cannot transfer online. Thus, in addition to creating ways in which values can have presence, and ways in which our valuing of them can be enabled in the very different terrain of online communication, value-sensitive design of our lives in an increasingly online world should also focus on identifying values the appreciation of which cannot, or cannot well, be replicated online and how the pursuit of these values may be better supported offline—the online social revolution kicked off by hijacking and derailing friendship. Reclaiming friendship, then, would be a good place to start.