Moral Intensifiers and the Efficiency of Communication

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I was very pleased to be asked to read and to comment on *Evil Online*, which strikes me as a timely and important moral investigation of our era. Computers interconnected with each other, whether it be by dial-in message board or the Reddit app on our smartphones, fundamentally alter the way people communicate. We communicate, simply put, more efficiently. And with this change in methods of communication comes changes in the way our moral world is organized.

For Cocking and van den Hoven, this change is for the worse. Online worlds create, in their view, a kind of 'moral fog', one that leads to a special kind of 'evildoing'. Our lives online—for various reasons, they discuss—draw us (or, at least, some of us) away from a 'prosocial' mindset to one that is much more susceptible to harm, whether directed to self or other. They write, 'Our online-transformed worlds have delivered new and widespread forms of moral fog that limit and negatively shape moral imagination and understanding' (147).

However, or so I shall argue in this brief commentary, I think that while Cocking and van den Hoven are correct to investigate the moral effects of our online existence, and are quite obviously correct to be concerned about the potential for evil such online worlds present, the online worlds we inhabit are diverse and morally complicated. In particular, I will argue that the same features of our online existence that engender evildoing also give rise to important instances of moral progress and moral good. In short, there is nothing

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inherently *evil* about the change in our world given its *e*-ness. However, or so it seems to me, one thing about which Cocking and van den Hoven are certainly correct is that online communities present a kind of unpredictable *intensification* of our moral atmosphere, likely displaying features characteristic of many technological advances in communication, and that presents unique features of its own.

The Efficiency of Communication

What, at heart, makes our online worlds different than the worlds we occupy in the 'real world'? What makes *cyber*space a distinct moral environment?

Cocking and van den Hoven suggest that there are a number of features that render our lives online particularly susceptible to evildoing (43–58). However, one might understand each of these characteristics under a more general heading. What distinguishes our online lives, at least in those corridors of the Internet that Cocking and van den Hoven identify as being especially susceptible to evildoing, is the *efficiency of communication*. Communication—sending information from one person to another, whether this is by text, video, audio, or any other medium—is simply more efficient than it has ever been. It is virtually costless to the end user (beyond the general costs they pay for data access). It is *instantaneous*. It is or can be *anonymous* (further reducing its costs). Couple these with the fact that it is possible to reach an extremely large audience, depending on one's forum, and that this audience is worldwide. Furthermore, it is possible to communicate directly with those whose interests, proclivities, and so on are your targets but also to do so without doing substantial research on how to communicate with those people in particular. (To communicate with fans of the heavy metal band Iron Maiden, for example, one needn't set up a lengthy and costly mail sign-up sheet or run advertisements on heavy metal radio—in itself inefficient insofar as it would speak to fans of Metallica also. One need only look to the subreddit r/IronMaiden or post to the wall of the official Iron Maiden Facebook group.) In addition, the end user can have sophisticated algorithms tailor just what sort of information and communication they wish to consume or would be interested in consuming, further reducing the cost of communication between people. If, for instance, I am a manufacturer of boutique oven mitts and I want to get the word out, I can have a social media algorithm present information about my company just to those people who are likely to be most interested.

But put in this way, one might initially be skeptical that the Internet as a tool is, per se, conducive to evildoing or good-doing. It is, after all, a tool for efficient communication. So why should we think that this generally pushes us toward goodness or evil? Cocking and van den Hoven suggest that there are key

features of the Internet that are redefining our social world (60) and introducing a moral fog that tends to lead people away from the prosocial and toward evil-doing (132–33). This includes 'selectivity', or the fact that one can have information (or disinformation) specifically tailored to one's own interest or proclivities, 'anonymity', or the degree to which we can communicate anonymously on the Internet, and 'publicity', which refers to the extent to which our lives online have broken down the 'public/private' barrier (chapter 2).

However, I think Cocking and van den Hoven are too quick. While I'm convinced that efficient communication *is* a good tool for the spread of evil online, it's not at all clear to me that those features of our online communities that make them efficient are not also conducive to the spread of good online.[1]

Some Cautionary Remarks

Prior to addressing the good to be found in our online worlds, however, I'd like to take a few paragraphs to critically address what Cocking and van den Hoven perceive as pervasive evils online. While I do not wish to dispute that there are many instances of moral bad that proliferate on the Internet, it's not always clear that the cases cited by Cocking and van den Hoven are representative of our lives online or, indeed, have anything to do with the existence of the Internet per se. For instance, they cite a 2012 incident of a gang rape that was filmed and photographed and subsequently posted online (15). Assuredly evil. But it's hard to see how the Internet itself contributed to the perspective of the perpetrators of the rape, beyond the toxic mixture of young masculinity and alcohol.

Furthermore, while Cocking and van den Hoven correctly note that the Internet—as a medium of extremely efficient communication—allows us to erode the private/public distinction by being considerably freer with our private information, it seems hard to believe that this phenomenon is Internet specific. They write,

> [B]oundary confusions about our public/private lives flourish online. Of particular concern is the vulnerability of our young people to such delusions, and their practice of posting personal details and private

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1. And while I'm certainly not prepared to do any of this research, it would perhaps be interesting to see whether any *other* technological jumps in the efficiency of communication carried with them similar features that Cocking and van den Hoven identify as problematic. For instance, we might wonder whether the invention of the printing press, moveable type, mass production of newspapers, efficient post delivery, telephone, etc. carried with them some changes, perhaps on a smaller scale, of the sort Cocking and van den Hoven identify as peculiar to the cyber.

> information on social networking sites. Again, the usual response is to
> urge young people to understand their personal information displayed
> online is not private but often widely publicized. [. . .] While this is plainly
> good advice so far as it goes, features of the Internet and of how it is
> used work against seeing things so clearly. [. . .] So while I might be told
> of the public, rather than private, nature of much Internet interaction,
> and of the dangers that go with this, I might not see the force of these
> claims very clearly, if, for example, I am a teenager and my social stand-
> ing or social inclusion might depend upon divulging personal details
> and information online. (54)

Once again, while it is certainly true that the Internet has allowed the break-
down of the public/private barrier, especially in young children, to proceed far
more efficiently, it would be misleading to say that this is a difference in kind
rather than degree. One need only recall the *TigerBeat* pen pal advertisements, in
which young people, mostly girls, published their personal information, includ-
ing their home address, in an internationally distributed teen magazine seeking
a pen pal. And while the Internet has clearly provided a great opportunity for
young people to trade their personal information for personal connection (real
or deceived), the desire to make such a trade is as old as adolescence itself.

Indeed, while Cocking and van den Hoven note a number of horrifying acts
that have used the Internet as an instrument or medium of communication, it's
not always clear that the Internet is an essential contributor to the evil involved
or whether the Internet actually serves as a mediating factor in the subsequent
evil. For instance, they note the following case:

> When a man in Germany decided to find someone who wanted to be
> killed and eaten by him, it took only a little while to identify someone,
> get in touch online, and stage a morbid sexual encounter. We know the
> details of the case because the perpetrator, Armin Meiwes, videotaped
> the whole procedure, and was convicted for killing his victim after hav-
> ing eaten his private parts and storing the rest of the body in deep freeze
> for later consumption. Without the Internet and the dark corners of the
> deep web hidden from plain sight, it would have been impossible, or at
> least extremely difficult, to find like-minded people and make these fan-
> tasies come true. (42–43)

I do not dispute that without the Internet Armin Meiwes would have had dif-
ficulty finding a *willing* victim of his cannibalistic sexual urges. But what is less
clear is whether the potential nonexistence of the Internet would have led Mei-
wes to forego his cannibalism, or simply to find an *un*willing victim.

Furthermore, while there assuredly are a number of websites dedicated to, for example, the promotion of self-harm, anorexia, and, even jihadism, Cocking and van den Hoven do little to convince the reader that these are pervasive aspects of our online lives rather than comparatively small 'corners' of the Internet.[2] Cocking and van den Hoven suggest that there are 500 pro-anorexia sites and also that major jihadist websites take up a large portion of Internet traffic. They write:

> Again (as we suggested earlier in regard to extreme pranks), you might agree that such specific cases depict some terrible corruption, and you might even agree that the online world seems implicated. However, you might well also think that the online worlds of Chesser and the like are very rare, and so a very small part of online activity. And so you might well think that such cases do not really present much of an indictment against life in our online-transformed worlds. Again, none the less, you would be wrong. Sites promoting terror are nothing like marginal dark alleys. As, for example, Barlett reports, the FBI estimates that one of the sites Chesser was involved in belonged to the 1% of sites on the Web that generated the most traffic. (27–28.)

Now this does seem problematic. But the statistic here (i.e., top one percent of sites by Internet traffic) is without context. How many Internet sites are there? Does this mean that they are visited regularly, by a worldwide audience? And, indeed, Cocking and van den Hoven provide ample room for doubt. In discussing the sheer size of the Internet, they write, 'It all started with four connected computers a decade ago. There are now 2.5 billion of them. This makes the Internet the largest manmade artifact. There are a staggering ten to the power of twelve websites (a million million). Every minute there are around a million YouTube views, Google searches and Facebook posts' (34).

Now, this is big. But notice that if there are ten to the power of twelve websites (i.e., a trillion websites), what does it say that any particular site is in the top one percent? Only that it is among the *ten billion most visited websites*. Is this particularly significant? A dark alley? It's unclear, but looked at in this way, it is not immediately obvious that the problems of jihadism, or anorexia advocacy, implicate our lives online *in particular*.

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2. This is in contrast to the 'pranking' genre of YouTube videos they note, which account for a truly staggering viewership. See Dean Cocking and Jeroen van den Hoven, *Evil Online* (New York: Wiley, 2018) p. 10.

Now, I don't want to argue ahead of myself. I don't want to argue that the efficiency in communication somehow passes by jihadists, pranksters, and those who wish to treat anorexia as a 'lifestyle choice' rather than a debilitating mental illness (17–18). For those with such interests, online tools will provide efficiency in spreading their messages, just as the Internet provides efficient communication or news headlines or the latest *Star Wars* trailer. But what Cocking and van den Hoven have yet to show is that the phenomenon of evil online is pervasive. And what they certainly have so far failed to show is that the phenomenon of *evil* online is pervasive *on balance*—that is, compared to the good that is or can be accomplished given the Internet's power to make communication near costless and near instantaneous. To this I now turn.

The Prosocial and the Promoral

To begin, I'd like to briefly inquire into the nature of what Cocking and van den Hoven call the 'prosocial'. Cocking and van den Hoven often refer to this term in ways that contrast the moral fog of online communities with a manner of development, or set of mental states, that are more aligned with moral norms. However, it is worth distinguishing two different ideas that may be bound up with the idea of a prosocial mindset. The first idea, call this the *prosocial proper*, is a set of mental states that are conducive to or reflective of the social world in which a person finds themselves. To put this another way, it is a mindset that is dedicated to fulfilling general *social* norms—including those set by one's community, family, schools, and so forth.

Let's call the *promoral* a mindset that is generally dedicated to or conducive of the development of moral values, such as a commitment to human flourishing in oneself and others, respect for persons, and so on. Obviously it would be wildly out of place to simply stipulate here what those values are, but for the sake of argument, I'm going to concentrate on human flourishing; generally someone has promoral attitudes when they, for example, display mental dispositions that help to develop such flourishing in themselves and in others around them.

As defined, it should be quite clear that the prosocial and the promoral are distinct. One can be perfectly prosocial but nevertheless quite *anti*moral if one's social norms are themselves not conducive to human flourishing. Indeed, in such circumstances, the promoral may very well be *anti*social. For instance, if one lives in an extremely repressive religious society, it could very well be promoral, but antisocial, to develop an interest in great secular literature. However, in such a case, developing promoral attitudes are to be encouraged, insofar as they contribute to the flourishing of oneself against the prevalent antiflourishing attitudes of one's general social circumstances.

So why is this significant for the present inquiry? I think the answer is this. While I will, at present, accept the general premise that online communities sometimes lead us astray from *prosocial* attitudes, it's not always clear that our lives online lead us astray from prosocial attitudes in a way that is also anti-*moral*. To illustrate this, I'd like to present an episode from the online community Reddit. For those who don't know, Reddit is a massive set of individual 'subreddits', or message boards dedicated to particular topics, anything from discussions about the news of the day, or among enthusiasts of very specific topics (r/synthdiy, for instance, is a dedicated community for those who like to build their own synthesizers), to boards full of silly content (e.g., r/MildlyStartledCats, which includes pictures of, well, you guessed it, and r/ThereWasAnAttempt, which details comical efforts gone wrong) to content that is just plain weird (including r/ImSorryJon, which reimagines the comic strip character Garfield as a grotesque, demented, Arbuckle-tormenting demon), to subreddits that are dedicated to people asking for serious advice on legal, romantic, and other matters. Most posts on Reddit in the latter set of categories involve a question, to which commentators will respond. Those comments are 'upvoted' or 'downvoted' by the other users of Reddit, and upvoting is generally taken to be a sign of approval. The most upvoted comments are displayed first after the original question or post.

The episode I'd like to discuss here is taken from r/relationshipadvice.[3] A young woman was about to get married to her fiancé of eight months. Two days prior to the wedding, the fiancé expressed a desire that the woman submit to a virginity test at the hands of his father and other male members of his extended family. She expressed discomfort at this, but seemed genuinely torn on whether to submit to this humiliating procedure. She summed up her feelings this way: "I want to call off the whole wedding because of this and never talk to him again. But at the same time [it's] only one thing and other than that we are genuinely perfect for each other and I [don't] want to spend my life with anyone else and it is very important to him and his family."

The general Reddit consensus was that this woman should refuse to submit, on the grounds that it is sexual assault and a degrading violation. In short, the morally correct answer. Of course, in the over 12,000 comments on this particular question, there were a number of them that were suspect, displayed 'casual bigotry', or that offered bizarre or borderline insane advice. But those were 'downvoted', and the consensus stood. In a posted update, the young woman declared

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3. See Reddit, 'Relationship Advice', <https://www.reddit.com/r/relationshipadvice/comments/cx7vr0/my22ffiance25mwanthisfathertocheckmy/> [accessed 4 March 2022].

that she refused to submit to the procedure and had ended her relationship with the man who insisted upon it. I submit, a moral win.

I mention this episode as an example of online communities directing someone away from what might have been a pro*social* occurrence (submitting to the social pressure from her fiancé to submit to this sexist and humiliating procedure) to a pro*moral* result, a refusal of this vulnerable young woman to submit to such treatment. Indeed, there are many episodes that have this structure. While Reddit does not have a perfect track record, the advice most commonly upvoted is generally sensible and can be counted on to support, rather than hinder, the flourishing of the advisee. And I think it would be remiss not to say that this is at least in part a result of the fact that this community is online. People in such online communities can ask frank questions that they may otherwise have been ashamed or unempowered to ask given their social communities. But this just illustrates the way in which the fact that our online lives can lead to antisocial outcomes does not entail that these online lives lead to antimoral outcomes. In fact, sometimes the achievement of moral outcomes requires activities that are *not* prosocial proper.

Indeed, one need not look to such dramatic examples to see the ways in which the *anti*social, or at the very least *a*social, nature of some Internet communication can lead specifically to human flourishing. Online communication, especially its worldwide nature, can allow those people who are culturally or geographically isolated a community with which to discuss shared interests, to ask advice, and so on, where doing so might be discouraged.

Good Peculiar to the Online

I've just pointed out one way in which prosocial attitudes and behaviors do not entail promoral attitudes and behaviors, and that in some cases, antisocial attitudes and behaviors, facilitated by the Internet, can lead to moral progress. In this section, I'd like to point out some ways in which those aspects of the Internet Cocking and van den Hoven identify as particularly conducive to evildoing are in fact Janus-faced. Considered fairly, these features can and have been used for the achievement of moral good.

#MeToo

One major complaint that Cocking and van den Hoven have about online environments is the way in which 'the Internet and social media disinhibit people

and easily escalate conflicts and problems' (5). However, escalation of this sort is not exclusive to *conflicts and problems* in the way Cocking and van den Hoven seem to suggest. Perhaps the most high-profile instance of this is the by-now-famous #MeToo Movement. In the wake of pervasive sexual harassment and abuse accusations against movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, actor Alyssa Milano, who has a substantial following on the social media platform Twitter, encouraged people to share their own stories of sexual harassment and abuse with the heading '#MeToo' (which had originated with artist and activist Tarana Burke). In the first twenty-four hours of her post, it had generated half a million responses on Twitter and over twelve million posts on the social media platform Facebook. The impact of this social media phenomenon is perhaps immeasurable and in some ways unpredictable. But it has certainly, at the very least, shone a light on pervasive cultures of sexual harassment and abuse in a number of major industries, including entertainment,[4] academia,[5] politics,[6] hospitality,[7] and many others. In addition, the social media campaign has led to companies changing policies for employees and taking a more active role in preventing sexual harassment. While the magnitude of the progress here to be made is as yet to be determined, it is hard to see how the #MeToo movement can be described as anything other than an on-balance good.[8]

In addition, it is hard to see how this on-balance good could have come about without some of the peculiar features of the Internet that make communication so efficient. While the #MeToo movement had been devised as early as 2006,[9] it did not reach its full potential as a force for social change until a popular actor posted on social media. Here the efficiency of online communication was critical. Without the initial tidal wave of support, it is hard to see how the movement would have reached its status as a cultural force for good.

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4. The most significant cases here involve Weinstein himself and the comedian Louis CK, along with the actor Asia Argento, herself abused by Weinstein but who was accused of sexual assault by a former costar.

5. See, for instance, 'Academia's #MeToo Moment: Women Accuse Professors of Sexual Misconduct', *Washington Post*, 10 May 2018.

6. One need only consult the highly fraught confirmation hearing of now justice Brett Kavanaugh or the high-profile resignation of senator Al Franken.

7. Former restauranteurs John Besh and Mario Batali were both accused of sexual abuse by multiple employees.

8. Of course, this is not to say that it is an unmitigated good. It could be, perhaps, that some individuals have been accused in the wake of the #MeToo movement of sexual harassment in ways that were false, though I am agnostic about whether this has ever occurred in fact.

9. 'Statistics', me too, <https://metoomvmt.org/about/#history> [accessed 26 February 2022].

Deadaptation

And while this next point is a bit a priori, and would need additional empirical study, it seems to me that access to the Internet can be a further force for good when it comes to the phenomenon of adaptive preferences.

Now, I don't have the space here to engage in a philosophical inquiry into the nature of adaptive preferences. This is a fraught issue, but a few things are generally agreed. Adaptive preferences are those that by and large do not reflect the agent's good and are 'adaptations' to the particular limitations a person faces. These adaptations will often result from, for example, a lack of information or a failure to imagine their life in a way different than the one they have.[10]

However, many hold that at least one way to begin to alleviate adaptive preferences (though certainly not a panacea) is exposure to information about the way life might be independent of someone's social circumstances. But to do this properly, one needs an efficient means of communication—one that can allow someone to, perhaps anonymously, explore the (to quote Mill) 'experiments in living' in which others have engaged. The more information available quickly, the more likely it is that someone will not fail to imagine or fail to appreciate how their existence may be different.

Again, this is not a cure-all for problematic adaptive preferences. Some forms of adaptation (what I have elsewhere called 'deep adaptation'[11]) would not be reversed by exposure to the information that the Internet provides. But the fact that the Internet holds great power to alleviate some insidious forms of adaptive preferences is an important good that cannot be ignored.

Collective Play

Having an efficient means of communication means that it is possible to engage in play with a much wider circle of people. And while the possibility of play is

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10. Cf. Serene Khader, *Adaptive Preferences and Women's Empowerment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Rosa Terlazzo, 'Adaptive Preferences: Merging Political Accounts and Well-Being Accounts', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 45 (2015), 179–96; Martha C. Nussbaum, 'Adaptive Preferences and Women's Options', in *Economics and Philosophy*, 17, 67–88.

11. See, for instance, Dale Dorsey, 'Adaptive Preferences Are a Red Herring', *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 3 (2017), 465–84. Note that I have also argued that deep adaptive preferences are more indicative of someone's good than more shallow or surface-level adaptation. If this is correct, it may be that the Internet has at least substantial power to cure the forms of adaptation it would be good to cure.

not, perhaps, the most significant good in our lives, it is one that should not be ignored and is certainly an aspect of any life well-lived.¹²

One important example of our ability to engage each other in collective play is the phenomenon of *rickrolling*. Rickrolling is essentially a broadscale practical joke. The joker sends the mark a hyperlink, ostensibly about something that the mark would find interesting, important, or significant. But rather than redirecting this person to whatever it was the link seemed to offer, they are redirected to YouTube, for the music video of Rick Astley's 'Never Gonna Give You Up'. It's not entirely possible to determine how many times this has occurred, but a superficial view count of this video on YouTube indicates the number is approaching at least a billion.

Now, this is just silly. But it's a kind of collective silliness, a joke that anyone who uses the Internet is in on. But such is the power of a tool of extraordinarily efficient communication. We can engage in silliness, play, and mirth on a *tremendous* scale.

Moral Intensification

Now what do these instances of good tell us? Do they tell us that the Internet is overwhelmingly good? That the instances of evil online, pointed out by Cocking and van den Hoven, are outweighed on balance?

No. Rather, what I think they show is that the Internet is a morally complicated phenomenon. The features of the Internet that make it ripe for a #MeToo movement, also make it ripe for anonymous predation, Internet shaming, and so on. As Cocking and van den Hoven rightly point out, it sometimes has a tendency to give rise to bad behavior on the part of folks who would otherwise not dream of it. However, rather than suggesting that we tend toward evil or good as a result of our lives online, it seems right instead to say that our lives online present a kind of moral intensity that can lead us in many moral directions, with unpredictable results.

By *moral intensity* I mean to refer to an overall increase in the ability of our actions to alter states of affairs, and alter the quality of people's lives, for better *and* worse. Because online communication is so efficient, we have the power to reach massive audiences almost costlessly. And we can use that power for good

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12. For instance, Martha Nussbaum suggests that play should be included among the ten basic capabilities; see Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 77.

or ill. Furthermore, acts that may, in isolation, have been harmless monkeyshines can take on a moral life of their own online. For instance, one might post a YouTube video of a practical joke or prank that would otherwise have been a simple joke between friends, have it 'go viral', and inspire a number of others to engage in behavior that has harmful or even disastrous consequences. One particularly clear example of this phenomenon is the Slender Man. Created as a response to a contest that urged participants to design and post original paranormal drawings, cartoons, and images, the Slender Man (i.e., a very tall shadowy figure) became a viral sensation among connected horror fans, appearing in Internet fiction, forums, and elsewhere. The development of this character became 'open source', with untold numbers of authors and artists posting about the Slender Man in dozens of Internet archives. Five years after the original post, two twelve-year-old girls in Wisconsin stabbed their friend nineteen times, indicating that they were under orders of the Slender Man.

And while our capacity to generate unpredictable bad consequences as a result of our actions online is certainly manifest, unpredictable good consequences multiply as well. A simple retweet requesting victims to tell their stories can give rise to a massive social movement. A simple question from a scared bride-to-be can generate massive awareness of covert sexual assault. A goofy one-off practical joke can lead to billions of instances of collective silliness. Rather than generating amoral fog—though this assuredly happens in some cases—I would instead argue that the prevailing moral phenomenon of the Internet and of our lives online is the *amplification of the consequences*—and the unpredictability of same—of our online activities *given* the efficiency of online communication. The Internet is, in essence, morally intense. And its moral intensity is amplified by its unpredictability.

With its unpredictability, I think, arises two of the great challenges of the Internet. First, a challenge for moral agents. How do we best attempt to control or limit the negative, and promote the good, consequences of our actions in light of the moral intensity of our online world? Second, a challenge for moral theorizing. Given that the consequences of actions are far more unpredictable than we might have originally supposed, is it acceptable to treat such consequences as forming the basis of our inquiry into the moral status of acts? Can we rightfully condemn as *wrong* the original posting of Slender Man? Or praise as *morally exemplary* Alyssa Milano's #MeToo exhortation? And while these questions require substantial reflection, I submit that plausible answers can only be arrived at by looking at the entirety of the Internet's moral intensity and not simply our capacity, real though it is, for great evil online.