

Review: JAR1345

THE INTERNET'S CONNECTION TO OUR DARK SIDES

a book review of
Virtually You: The Dangerous Powers of the E-Personality
by Elias Aboujaoude

(W. W. Norton Company, 2011)

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Many angles can be taken on the global phenomenon of the Internet. We should consult several different perspectives in order to gain a knowledgeable and wise stand point on how our lives—the sense of self, family, politics, art, and so on—have been radically and often invisibly changed by life on the screen. If we fail to reflect on the nature and effects of this technological aspect of culture, we may fall for its vices and so fail to heed Scripture's warnings about becoming worldly—captured by fallen ways of thinking, feeling, and acting (Matt. 5:16–18; Rom. 12:1–2; James 1:27; 1 John 2:15–17).

Elias Aboujaoude, a psychiatrist at the Stanford School of Medicine, specializes in obsessive/compulsive disorders. As an expert on personality pathologies, he considers how Internet use generates an “e-personality” that is something less than healthy or may even become pathological. He claims that the e-personality includes delusions of grandeur, narcissism, viciousness, impulsivity, infantile regression, the tyranny of unhealthy emotion, an unwise view of sex and love, a naïve view of knowledge, and Internet addiction. Although his discussion falls a bit outside of personality disorders, Aboujaoude also claims that the Internet preserves information better left forgotten (thus haunting many users), and that the Internet erodes privacy, since formerly confidential information is made so easily available.

A Freudian Assessment. To rightly assess Aboujaoude's work, we need to ask two questions. First, what is his standard for judging behaviors as healthy or unhealthy? Second, does the Internet in fact tend to cause the disorders and problems that he discovers?

Aboujaoude assesses personality from a psychoanalytical (or Freudian) perspective. This is a thoroughly naturalistic perspective that claims that human beings are nothing but socialized animals made up of three basic drives: id, ego, and superego. The id, which is inborn, desires sensual gratification of all sorts without restraint, thus

associating us closely with the animal realm. "It is the seat of sexual energy and a bottomless reservoir of libido. In its illogical mix of drives and urges...it will not take no for an answer" (p. 94). The ego, on the other hand, develops over time and urges us toward common sense, logic, and restraint. The superego is our sense of morality, required of any civilized member of society. (This conception of the person is more developed in Freud's book, *Civilization and Its Discontents*.)

Given this materialistic basis (Freud was an atheist), the goal of psychotherapy is to integrate these three drives in a personally and socially constructive way. However, Freudianism cannot appeal to any sense of moral character or moral law that is supported by a transcendent moral standard. The Freudian is therefore left with only a vague sense of keeping the more animalistic id under control by way of the ego and superego. Since humans are *nothing but* a certain kind of animal, there is, therefore, no normative reason for restraining the id on the basis of objective moral values. Yet Aboujaoude wants to preserve the restraint, respect, and love required for civilization. He does so by opposing the id-driven excesses of Internet culture, such as grandiosity, narcissism, sexual adventurism, and so on.

On the basis of his materialistic worldview, however, he can only attempt to *describe* the psyche; he cannot consistently *prescribe* any given pattern of behavior. The Freudian can only appeal to our biological instincts, and, as C. S. Lewis points out in *The Abolition of Man*, "our instincts are at war." If these instincts disagree—"Should I avoid this pornography web page" (voice of the superego) "or indulge myself?" (voice of the id)—one cannot adjudicate between them on the basis of instinct. One would need a bona fide *conscience* for that—a moral monitor that alerts us to moral realities. That is precisely what Aboujaoude's worldview cannot provide, however. As Lewis writes in *The Abolition of Man*, the materialist is "trying to get a conclusion in the imperative mood out of premisses in the indicative mood: and though he continues trying to all eternity he cannot succeed, for the thing is impossible."¹ In other words, the materialist lacks any transcendent and authoritative reference point by which to judge good from bad, virtue from vice, healthy from unhealthy.

Identifying Prideful Patterns. While this book identifies some real vices to be avoided, it can provide no philosophically credible reason to do so. Further, Aboujaoude is also prey to errant cultural trends about morality. For example, he approves of homosexual activity so long as it does not become obsessive, and even claims that the Internet has been a boon for homosexuals trying to meet each other for sexual liaisons. (*The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which is the bible of secular psychology and psychiatry, removed homosexuality as a mental disorder in its second edition in 1973; it is now in its fourth edition.) Biblically, homosexual behavior is a result of the fall; it is an aberration that falls outside of what God designed humans to be (Rom. 1: 26–27). In addition, Aboujaoude does not object to sexual activity outside of marriage, but has some scruples about the kind of promiscuity he thinks the Internet encourages (see chap. 7). This is contrary to Scripture, which limits sexual intercourse to marriage (Gen. 2:20–25; 1 Cor. 6:9–10).

But if the book's foundation for morality is cracked and unstable, is there anything to be gained from its observations? Despite Aboujaoude's Freudian naturalism, by God's common grace, he can identify some vicious patterns engendered by the Internet and offer some useful advice on how to avoid them. However, the Christian considers these pathological patterns under the category of sinful vices, offenses against God, oneself, and others. Christianity also offers God's forgiveness through the finished work of Christ and the moral strength to resist sin and pursue God and His kingdom (John 3:16; Matt. 6:33).

Aboujaoude uncovers a central sinful propensity in Chapter 2, "Delusions of Grandeur." The foundational human sin is pride: overestimating and overvaluing oneself at the expense of others and the Creator. Scripture teaches that "God opposes the proud, but exalts the humble" (James 4:6). Whenever the Internet encourages pride, we should be on guard. Because of the speed, reach, and multifaceted nature of the Internet, it can deceive us into thinking (or pretending) that we are more than we are. Aboujaoude calls this tendency "grandiosity." It was exhibited early on in the Internet's history with the dot.com boom and bust. Inspired by unrealistic predictions of a miraculous new money-making technology, we were told that millions could be made out of thin air. For some, this dream came true; for the vast majority, the bubble burst.

The speed and ease of the Internet may also contribute to our tendencies to overrate our financial assets and thus end up in terrible debt. Aboujaoude writes that "in 2008 total U.S. consumer debt reached \$2.52 trillion" and that "the average American with a credit file is responsible for \$16,635 in debt, excluding mortgages" while "the personal savings rate has hovered close to 0 percent for several years." (58). The author claims that the "e-personality" does not take money as seriously when making transactions online, since that realm, while exhilarating, seems "dissociated from...real life implications" (58).

Information Torrent, Knowledge Drought. We know that reality wins out in the end, however, as the Preacher of Ecclesiastes tells us, "Now all has been heard; / here is the conclusion of the matter: / Fear God and keep his commandments, / for this is the duty of all mankind. For God will bring every deed into judgment, / including every hidden thing, / whether it is good or evil" (Ecc. 12:13–14; see also Matt. 25:31–46).

We are moral agents under the audit of Eternity (Kierkegaard), whose every asset—spiritual or physical—is ultimately a gift of God (James 1:17). Therefore, our sense of self and the use of our possessions should always consider "real life implications," since we were redeemed by God's grace in order to do good works (Eph. 2:8–9) and to bear fruit that will last (John 15:16). We should not let the Internet bewitch us into thinking otherwise.

I could write more about the other vices of the "e-personality," but I will conclude with some reflections on Chapter 8, "The Illusion of Knowledge," since questions of truth and knowledge are perennially pertinent and since the Internet often

corrupts our sense of verity and falsity. Christians, of all people, should be people of truth, who know their God, who make God known, and who sniff out, unmask, and confront falsehoods that obscure the truth that sets us free (Eph. 4:15; John 8:31–32).

While Aboujaoude does not elaborate much on the nature of truth and knowledge, he does take truth to be a matter of objective facts and avers there are right and wrong ways to pursue truth. While he avoids any real philosophical discussion of the nature of truth or epistemology, he rightly assumes a correspondence view of truth: true statements correspond or accurately describe reality; false statements fail to do so. Knowing what is true is not a matter of lucky guesses, but of using the proper means to determine which statements are true and which are false, since knowledge is, in the classical understanding, “justified, true belief.”

While the Internet unleashes a vast torrent of *information* on us, it does not automatically produce *knowledge* (let alone wisdom). In fact, most Americans are computer-savvy, well-informed ignoramuses—awash in information (often in factoids or video bites), but lacking in genuine knowledge. This is because knowledge usually requires the cultivation and preservation of intellectual virtues in knowers. We must know how to approach truth and develop the skills for so doing. Aboujaoude notes that the Internet, despite its tsunami of words, has led to a decline in the quality of reading. (Nicholas Carr develops this in more depth in *The Shallows*.) Words on screens are more ephemeral, less rooted in stable objects, and easier to skim or scan than words in books, magazines, or journals. Using evolutionary concepts consonant with his (unjustified) naturalism, Aboujaoude claims that online “we become hunters and gatherers (talk about regression!), going after the easiest prey first and the lowest hanging fruit” (192). Students thus steal material from the intrinsically unreliable and mercurial Wikipedia for papers. People read less offline, and read less deeply online. Information online conforms to no clear hierarchy of intellectual authority (198). It is a digital free-for-all for most users. In all this, intellectual virtue is forfeited and knowledge becomes harder to find. At the end of *Virtually You*, Aboujaoude writes of his hope that we can find some way to measure the true value of the Internet, so we can engage it wisely. Sadly, his own worldview forbids that from becoming a reality, since his worldview omits the Author of wisdom, God Himself.

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NOTES

- 1 C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man*, in C. S. Lewis, *The Complete C. S. Lewis Signature Classics* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 477.