

Distance Education and Pursuit of the Common at the Time of COVID-19: Ontology of Separation

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INTRODUCTION: THE CREATION OF THE COMMON DIGITAL SPACE

The radical changes in social systems and people's ways of living that have arisen with the coronavirus disease of 2019 (COVID-19), and the difficulties and critical situations that people are now confronting, has made them realize that the private question, "What does it mean to live a happy life?" is simultaneously part of the public agenda. The crisis in hospitals, the bankrupt businesses, the enforced reconstruction of educational systems and methods—all encourage a shift of thinking over the division of the private and the public in democracy, making us realize that individuals in their various domestic things are involved in the creation of public knowledge and that they are already in a shared space. The line between the private and the public is blurred, and the very meaning of "the public" should be reconsidered, as should "the private." The crisis itself impels us towards a holistic view of human being, and this orients us towards a renewed way of creating the common.

Against this background, this essay focuses on the digital commons, which we believe is a potentially fruitful concept for reconsidering the idea of the common at the time of COVID-19. It is a public site of shared space, resources and knowledge, enabled by border-crossing digital space and time. The term "digital commons" has come into use in such empirical areas as sustainability studies, computer technology, and economics, and it has emerged also in library practice.¹ The combination of the digital and the commons has created new possibilities as well as challenges in our times. As the digitalization of university education indicates, shared digital space, resources and knowledge are expected to have the potential to enable a pooling of knowledge beyond differences in position, in which new

possibilities of the public are realized. At the same time, as some of the criticism of online teaching demonstrates, the digital commons can also have negative effects. With this background in mind, we would like to raise three philosophically practical tasks involving the digital commons for democracy and education. First, at times when discrimination and prejudice have been manifested: how can we cultivate, in virtual reality, imagination and aesthetic sensitivity to the other? Second, how far can the divisions in and possibilities of recovering society's bonds be reconsidered through forms of withdrawal? Third, what kind of an alternative form of open-mindedness be cultivated at a time of closure and barriers? These are the overarching questions that we shall pursue in this essay.

To this end, this essay is engaged in philosophical investigations into the ways that people can attain the common, beginning with distance and separation as experienced in digital space. Specifically, we would like to draw attention to the American transcendentalism of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, because their thought is full of suggestions that can help to elaborate the idea of the common to be pursued in digital space. Their radical transcendentalist commitment to our ordinary lives can be appreciated anew today, enabling a way of thinking about distance that exceeds any facile binary distinctions and crosses borders.

This essay is organized as follows. Section II, "Distance on the Internet and in Online Education," reviews articles by Andrew Feenberg and Paul Standish as they have special bearing on the idea of distance in distance education and identify some challenges in the creation of the digital commons as evidenced in COVID-19. Section III, "An Ontology of Separation: Some Possibilities of American Transcendentalism," discusses the ontology of separation drawn from Emerson and Thoreau because this unparalleled perspective can be developed as a promising, alternative philosophy for our pandemic times. Section IV, "The Teaching of Distance in Distance Education," discusses some educational implications for creating the common as the teaching of distance. In Section V, some concluding remarks are made.

DISTANCE ON THE INTERNET AND IN ONLINE EDUCATION

One feature of the internet is that it makes all physical distances the same. Someone in Indonesia, for example, is as near as someone in Moscow or in your town, if you are participating in the same seminar. There is a ubiquitous nearness. But what is the consequence of this for our notions of nearness and neighboring? Everyone is potentially your neighbor. This inevitably alters, for good and ill, the idea of the neighbor.

A recent article by Feenberg suggested a fruitful line of response.² In his analysis of online communities, he discussed some distinctive features of and challenges to the creation of the common in digital space. Feenberg concluded that the environment created by the internet opened up possibilities beyond face-to-face interactions. Another notable feature of online communities was the blurring of the border between the personal and the social, between the private and the public.³ Online communities created a new form of “civic public” and this through the mediation of meaningful, personal encounter among individuals.⁴ Thus, as Feenberg emphasized, communication on the internet created “social capital in online communities.”⁵

Feenberg also pointed out, however, the negative dimensions of online communities. First was the shift from “project-based to personality-based” communities: “Interaction is not organized around a project but around a persona,” as he wrote, and as a result social space could be occupied with trivialities and narcissistic posturing.⁶ Second, there was a potentially negative turnout in the eclipse of intention and meaning through an exclusive focus on data.⁷ Third were the negative aspects of closeness and intimacy: the creation of bullying, prejudice and hatred as a result of anonymity. The distance created by the internet provided space for dissent but also a “safe space” for racism and breaking down the distinction between what could be said in private and public discourse.⁸ In order to resist such negative tendencies, Feenberg proposed the idea of the project-based online community and the creation of a critical public in online communities, a public in which “true collaboration occurs.”⁹ What was significant about

Feenberg's suggestion was his remembering of the need for philosophical and normative space in online communities and for democratic rationality beyond technical control.¹⁰ He called for the use of technology for political discussion and resistance, and for democratic discourse as opposed to commercial and populist alternatives.¹¹ And this suggested a way to build sound neighborly relationships with distance.

In a slightly different strain, Standish explored the danger and the possibilities of distance in virtual reality and online education.¹² Like Feenberg, Standish cautioned against the negative effect of a "digitalized knowledge economy."¹³ It reduced knowledge to information with its concomitant skills, and the worlds technology opens were neutralized.¹⁴ Precisely because of these dangers, Standish called for the necessity of a better philosophy of technology. Unlike Feenberg, whose focus was on the creation of the critical public for democratic rationality, Standish's focus was more on the subtle, phenomenological dimension of the lives of human beings engaged in the building of neighboring online relationships, and he developed his argument from a post-structuralist perspective. Referring specifically to Jacques Derrida's criticism of the metaphysics of presence, Standish emphasized the significance of remembering the "non-present," "the hidden," and the "invisible" in and behind virtual reality: an absence that he claimed to be the source of the vitality of our lives.¹⁵ Related to this was his warning against the illusory nature of the immediacy and closeness that were supposedly guaranteed by "direct experience," and by face-to-face interaction.¹⁶ Standish argued that there was "no pure authenticity of teaching and learning" in face-to-face experience.¹⁷ He implicitly destabilized the dichotomy between the virtual and the face-to-face, and this led to his claim that it was possible to provide a "rich sensuous virtual experience" online.¹⁸ Standish thus indicated the significance of distance and indirectness in building a genuine sense of neighborhood.

Furthermore, Standish provided concrete directions for such distance education. In particular, he emphasized the significance of introducing written interaction in online environments, including the

possibility of the use of chat and emails.¹⁹ There was a certain rhythm, momentum and spontaneity in writing online. There was also “the nonlinear nature of the thinking that writing promotes.”²⁰ In using the web, the learner’s thinking was opened to the possibility of finding out things by chance. In contrast to the “spectatorial orientation” in internet activity, which constituted a negative form of distance between the subject and the object, there was the possibility of absorption in the experience of indirectness through writing.²¹ Such activity was characterized by a “humble relation to the possibilities of words” rather than a manipulative control of things.²² Standish opened up possibilities of online education through his attention to language and indicated avenues to the creation of the space for shared knowledge and the common, beginning in and with distance.

As an elaboration of the central three questions raised at the beginning, four crucial philosophical and educational questions are prompted by Feenberg and Standish centering on distance and online education. First, how can healthy spaces for dissent, rather than spaces for discrimination and prejudice, be created in online communities? Second, how can we create active, project-oriented online communities that avoid narcissistic self-absorption? Third, how can we regain intimacy in digital space at a distance? And fourth, and finally, how can we create the experience of the common and rich “social capital” if we start from the physically isolated experience of using the internet? These are the questions that will be addressed in the next section.

AN ONTOLOGY OF SEPARATION: SOME POSSIBILITIES OF AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM

In response, we would like to explore an alternative philosophy which is viable at the time of COVID-19. This is to be found in the American transcendentalism of Emerson and Thoreau, especially as taken forward in the work of Stanley Cavell. 19th century American transcendentalism may sound irrelevant to the age of the internet; the originality of its thinking, however, provides an unparalleled basis from which to respond to those questions prompted by Feenberg and Standish.

Here, we would like to propose what we call an ontology of separation. Although Emerson's and Thoreau's philosophy was dedicated toward the regaining of intimacy with the world and toward the returning of philosophy to "the low, the common."²³ These things were to be achieved, in their view, through the realization of our separateness. As Feenberg said, the ultimate task of education in digital space is the creation of a shared space for knowledge, for rich social capital, and for the ethics of the common good. Thus, in the light of the four questions raised in the previous section, the question to be brought into focus here is how, beginning with the current state of isolation, separation and social distance, and resisting the neutralizing effects of the internet, such a state can be attained. By contrast to Martin Heidegger's ontology of "being-in-the-world," which centered on a particular place and was grounded in the sense of belonging to a shared land, Emerson and Thoreau were more cautious in view of the danger of conformity that was inherent in the idea of belonging.²⁴ They were in quest of something beyond the immediate and the local (it was no longer land!), and their transcendentalist thought was open to something that was yet to come. Drawing on Cavell's rereading of Emerson and Thoreau, the following four related concepts are identified as characterizing the ontology of separation.

First is the idea of privacy and inwardness as the precondition for the creation of the public and the common. What was missing, perhaps, from the critical discourse of democratic rationality that Feenberg emphasized in online community was the existential sense of each person who participated in the creation of the common and democratic public. In view, however, of the current blurring of the line between the personal and the social, between the private and the public in our digital lives, we need to begin with inwardness and the sense of privacy as the very source of the separation of human existence and as a precondition of the public. The writings of both Emerson and Thoreau are permeated by the sense of privacy and inwardness as a precondition for the quest of common humanity. And this sense of separateness and distance is as crucial as that of commonality in their thinking. We believe this is crucial to creating a healthy

space for dissent. This is shown most explicitly in Emerson's statement: "the inmost in due time becomes the outmost."²⁵ The strong sense of interiority in Emerson's and Thoreau's texts is a matter not of isolated individualism, of solipsism, or of narcissistic absorption, but of a singularity of the self, which Thoreau called the "private sea, the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean of one's being alone."²⁶ The interiority of the self is not a priori, but is something to be achieved, paradoxically through participation in the language community. Secrecy and privacy are already aspects of speech and writing, and in that sense alone they are already public. Cavell said that before the process of individuation, "there are no individuals, hence no humanity, hence no society."²⁷ There are no firsts.

The second feature is the idea of building closeness in distance in a way that restores intimacy. In Cavell's ordinary language philosophy, the face-to-face, direct relationship was considered to harbor the danger of covering over the separation and distance that were crucial to the acknowledgment of the individuality of the other.²⁸ This had to do with Cavell's approach to skepticism, which accepted "the pain of acknowledging separateness."²⁹ In his account of the self and other relationship, Cavell did not begin with continuity and connection, but with the singularity of the self that was in hope of achieving connection with the other. As he said about Thoreau's *Walden*, "what is most intimate is what is furthest away; the realization of 'our infinite relations,' our kinships, is an endless realization of our separateness."³⁰ This connects in telling ways with coming to understand and accept our separateness from one another, and perhaps a separation within ourselves. Thoreau's idea of "the father tongue" offered us a hint here.³¹ In contrast to the mother tongue, reengagement with the father tongue was a way of sustaining the space of what Cavell called "the daily, insistent split in the self that being human cannot . . . escape."³² This would be a distance from ourselves within our words and thoughts. We accepted that we lived with this split and do not seek wholeness or intactness. So perhaps we can say, the art of distance education is to teach us distance. It is not impossible to build the sense of closeness in distance, say, as "kindred from a distant

land.”³³

Third is the idea of neighboring and nextness. If keeping distance is the ontological condition of human being, how then can we rebuild the relationship with the other so that we can create the common, Feenberg’s rich “social capital,” again? Here, Thoreau in particular gave us a hint in his idea of neighbors. In going to live in the woods near Concord, he both kept distance from and maintained connection with the townsfolk, a mile distant from them, as their neighbor. But they were not the only neighbor with whom Thoreau had connection. His neighboring ranged from his connection with animals and insects in the wood to his reading of such classics as Confucius and *The Iliad*. Neighboring for him did not necessarily involve closeness and immediacy but cut across separation. The art of keeping a distance lay in building nextness to others and the world and even to one’s own self. This Cavell called “Walden’s solution to the problem of self-consciousness, or the sense of distance from self, or division of self.”³⁴ There was the suggestion of a gap, of not fully settling down with one’s own self.

Fourth is the moment of leaving and departure. Unlike the foundationalist thought of Heidegger that encouraged us to settle down at home, Cavell highlighted the onward movement of Emerson’s and Thoreau’s thinking. For them, “the achievement of the human requires not inhabitation and settlement but abandonment, leaving.”³⁵ Self-abandonment cannot be equated with selflessness. It is better understood in terms of an idea of immigrancy in American transcendentalism, which was alien to Heidegger’s ontology. If there is anything cosmopolitan about American transcendentalism, it is this idea of common humanity to be achieved always in the movement of leaving.³⁶ What is at stake in “onward thinking” is not so much the ultimate goal of the common as each moment of crossing borders—that of converting crisis into opportunities and darkness into light.³⁷

Based on these observations about the unparalleled features of Emerson’s and Thoreau’s thought, we shall discuss the educational implications in the next section.

THE TEACHING OF DISTANCE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

How can the ontology of separation give us concrete indications regarding the creation of the common in digital space, as raised in the beginning of this essay? In response, we turn to the teaching of distance in distance education. We do not propose to cover the range of possibilities provided by the internet but to consider the kind of practice that has become “the new normal” for many teachers around the world in the time of COVID-19. Here, we shall propose three dimensions of distance education: a community of distance, the art of withdrawal and international exchange without travel.

A COMMUNITY OF DISTANCE: SENSITIVITY TO THE OTHER

Here is a suggestion for distance education that has purchase especially in relation to the question of the respective virtues of face-to-face and online education. There is a tacit assumption that face-to-face teaching ensures a richer learning environment, in which the human contact is real. As Standish and Cavell pointed out, however, the idea of the immediacy of direct experience is an illusion: it harbors a potential blindness to the misunderstanding, unknowability, and untranslatability that attend even familiar phenomena. Is there not a chance, then, that, if adequate attention is paid to what is not simply present in virtual reality, and if it is remembered that supposedly direct interactions are in any case themselves dependent on what is not directly present, we can create space for meaningful, personal encounter among individuals in online communities?

Whether face-to-face or virtual, what is at stake here is the mode of knowing. For Cavell, living with uncertainties and with the unknown was not a matter of partial understanding or partial misunderstanding of the other, trapped as this would be in expectations of knowing the other. For Cavell’s response to skepticism did not lead to knowledge but to acknowledgment, learning how to close your eyes in the face of doubt. As Cavell said: “To live in the face of doubt, eyes happily shut, would be to fall in love with the world. For if there is a correct blindness, only love has it.”³⁸ It required

receptivity to the other and the perseverance to live through obscurities, and this was accompanied by a rigour of language epitomized by the father tongue. In times when we are compelled to live in virtual reality in some degree, learning to have correct blindness becomes a pressing need: we need to sensitize ourselves to the possibility of failures of understanding. The experience of the father tongue here will help us learn how to live with the gap, with the untranslatable and ungraspable. Acknowledgment in this Cavellian sense is needed all the more in conditions of virtual reality for the creation of what might be called a community of distance. Addressing the question of how to create imaginative and sympathetic space in online communities, we need to be more attuned to the sense of the uncommon and the foreign. That is—factors that may be felt experientially in virtual reality but that are in any case internal to the lives of human beings, although often unacknowledged.

If we transform the way we are engaged in language, the quality and mode of communication in the digital space can be transformed. We come to exchange on the internet with a degree of indirectness. You think a moment before you type, you turn your microphone on before you speak in a seminar, and you may have to be invited by the teacher or chair. Dialogue within a small group, students testing their words with one another, perhaps with the common text in hand, a web-conference that creates the space for a common forum—we can think of diverse ways in which this digital space might create a community of distance.

THE ART OF WITHDRAWAL: RECOVERING SOCIETY'S BONDS

How can the ontology of separation in American transcendentalism help us respond to worries with regard to separation and isolation in digital space? In response, the ontology of separation points us to the sense of distance neither as the cause of prejudice nor in a succumbing to its neutralizing effects but as a resource of social participation: the possibility for disconnection and reconnection through withdrawal, the uncommon as the resource of the common. Withdrawal can be shifted from the state of seclusion in a gated community, as it were, to transcendence in a wider community, prepar-

ing and learning to take the risk of exposing oneself to the other. Withdrawal in this sense is an occasion and chance for undergoing the pain of individuation and separation. This is the experience of self-transcendence and self-distancing.

It is here pertinent to acknowledge the importance of creating space within this digital common ground for the dissonant and the otherwise excluded: to commit to something like the Thoreauvian idea of citizenship without inclusion.³⁹ Indeed, there are many cases of young people suffering from *hikikomori* (the phenomenon in Japan of social withdrawal into private space, school-refusal, etc.) coming back to learning through online teaching and recovering society's bonds. They had stopped attending school because of peer pressure or bullying and had become frightened by social interaction. In online teaching, however, in a one-to-one relationship with a teacher whom they trust, or in online platforms where they can secure some degree of privacy, they can start to participate again in social communication. This will guide us towards a rethinking of political education that stresses the need to find the political in the contribution of one's private voice to public space. In the pursuit of the common in digital space, it will become easier for some to speak out, using chat and social media, especially where the teacher skillfully encourages these possibilities. This may be psychologically easier to do than in face-to-face relationships, and it has the potential to cultivate the art of withdrawal as well as open-mindedness.

INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE WITHOUT TRAVEL: CULTIVATING OPEN-MINDEDNESS

Let us start with Thoreau who mentioned:

The wild goose is more of a cosmopolite than we; he breaks his fast in Canada, takes a luncheon in the Ohio, and plumes himself for the night in a southern bayou. . . . The universe is wider than our views of it.⁴⁰

It is said there is disappointment among students who have lost the chance to study abroad at the time of the pandemic. Overseas travel has

suddenly become more difficult due to COVID-19. In the meantime, because of this physical difficulty, diverse online meetings and virtual conferences have opened. These cross borders in unprecedented ways, instilling a cosmopolitan commitment to common experience in ways that span national and cultural borders. American transcendentalism points us to the possibility of international exchange without travel, showing the diverse possibilities of distance education. The wild goose Thoreau described above was a symbol of becoming cosmopolitan, with no particular home but being at home everywhere. This was a figure who opened-up one's inward horizons at home, where one was exposed to an instilling of thought. The above passage is followed by the quote below:

Direct your eye right inward, and you'll find
A thousand regions in your mind
Yet undiscovered. Travel them, and be
Expert in home-cosmography.⁴¹

“Home-cosmography” suggests shared space among distant people, with a sense of closeness. In digital space we can explore diverse ways to create such experience of crossing borders, occasioning intense moments of encounter with the other, and penetrating the narcissistic self-absorption into which, in these times, we can easily lapse. Joint experience of translation online is an example. Students are given a foreign text in which they immerse themselves in translation so that they can test diverse meanings and implications in conversation with other students online. The experience of the untranslatable is the very occasion of teaching in and by distance, of realizing the difficulty of understanding the other as well as of finding some common ground. Such experience of translation encourages us to convert the way we live in relation to borders without reinforcing barriers. What is most needed today for cultivating open-mindedness seems to be such a cosmopolitan endeavor of crossing borders, without actual travel, while staying home.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The ideas of Emerson and Thoreau that we have considered cannot simply and immediately be converted into technological know-how; neither do they give us direct and explicit answers to problems; and yet they teach us that we can convert the crisis we face today into an opportunity, a chance to learn from and in distance for the sake of creating a new commons; and this, by bridging the private and the public. It is right to press the familiar criticism that online education can exacerbate social inequality, where students do not have adequate access to the technology. But American transcendentalism points us to a different aspect of the common and an alternative horizon of philosophy—philosophy that can deal with the question of how we can create a shared, rich space for the mutual education of holistic human beings at a distance. Political questions are inevitable here, and yet, such political matters are inseparable from the psychological and existential dimensions of human being. In this sense, we might say that American transcendentalism can today serve as pan-demic philosophy—philosophy in response to the crisis of the pandemic and philosophy for all the people.

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9 Feenberg, 236.

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11 Feenberg, 241.

12 Paul Standish, "Fetish for Effect," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 34, no. 1 (2000): 151-168.

13 Standish, "Fetish for Effect," 163.

14 Standish, 158.

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20 Standish, 167.

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- 26 Emerson, *Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 301.
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- 28 Stanley Cavell, *The Senses of Walden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 64-65.
- 29 Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters of a Register of the Moral Life* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 112.
- 30 Cavell, *The Senses*, 54
- 31 Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden in Walden and Other Writings of Henry David Thoreau*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: The Modern Library, 1992), 96.
- 32 Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 5.
- 33 Cavell, *Senses*, 54.
- 34 Cavell, 107.
- 35 Cavell, 138.
- 36 Cavell, 158
- 37 Cavell, 135
- 38 Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 431.
- 39 Naoko Saito, *American Philosophy in Translation* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019), 130.
- 40 William Habbington, "To My Honored Friend Sir Ed. P. Knight," as quoted by Thoreau, *Walden*, 300.

41 Thoreau, 300.