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The (im)possibility of ethics in the information age

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the possibility that the ethical claim of the other, that sense of being *bound to* the other, may becoming more and more difficult to experience as information technology increasingly mediates our social being. The paper will support the supposition of Don Caputo that obligation does not emanate from codes, imperatives or moral arguments. Rather it will argue that obligation takes hold of us from within disaster. Obligation, our being bound-to, finds us when we come face to a face in disaster. The paper will argue that electronic mediation is inducing a sense of hyperreality into our world (Baudrillard). It will argue that this hyperreality is making our ethical sensibility nebulous to the point that we are not coming face to face with our obligations. An analysis of the Baring bank disaster will be used to demonstrate the point. The paper will show that Nick Leeson was in a hyperreal world in which he was not able to come face to face with the victims of the disaster. The electronic hyperreal world of financial markets, where traders deal in abstract numbers, movements on the screen, made it possible for him to look over and past the faces and proper names of the victims; their claim became diffused in the numbers on the screen, not real cash only numbers, not real people with faces and proper names, just numbers. If this supposition seems tenable what are we to do? The paper argues that we do not need more codes, imperatives or moral arguments, as such. Rather we need to keep our lives at the resolution, of faces and proper names—if obligation happens this is where it is likely to be. © 2002 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. ‘Whither is Obligation?’ he cried. ‘I shall tell you. We have killed it—you and I. All of us are its murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? *Whither are we moving?...Obligation is dead. Obligation remains dead. And we have killed it....*What was the holiest and most powerful of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe the blood off us?...’

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke and went out. “I come too early,” he said then; “my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way...—it has not yet reached the ears of man.” Adapted from Nietzsche (1974)

I did not steal any money. I hope that is clear to everybody... Nick Leeson (Statement made by Leeson at the time of his arrest)

Ethics is not easy anymore—maybe it never was. It seems as if the ethical resources available to the ordinary person is rapidly becoming fragmented, distributed and ambiguous. For one, the traditional sources of moral knowledge such as religion, the state, and the family are becoming increasingly elusive as the nature and legitimacy of these institutions are being challenged and transformed. I am not trying to make a fundamental point. I am merely indicating that the question of right and wrong, of how one *ought* to live, has, for some time now, become less and less obvious.

At the same time ethical dilemmas confronting the citizens of the information society are rapidly exploding locally and globally. Information technology has created a surveillance society in which the issue of individual privacy is no longer space and time bound (Barlow, 1991; Introna, 1996; Lyon, 1994). By way of the internet, traditionally located (or locatable) ethically sensitive situations such as pornography, sex, and affairs are now as ‘near’ as an internet connection (Hoffman & Novak, 1995; Leun, 1995). Software piracy, hacking, and computer viruses are challenging many of the traditional social norms. It seems as if the citizens of the information society do not think pirating software is like stealing a stereo, and computer hacking is not like breaking a window to enter a building illegally¹.

¹ In informal surveys with my first year undergraduate students, approximately 90% of them felt it was outrightly wrong to steal, but only 5% felt it was generally wrong to pirate proprietary software.

Through the global media network ethical issues such as genocide in Rwanda and Bosnia, human rights violations in China, famine and starvation in Africa, to name a few, pour into living rooms to the point where it becomes difficult to distinguish between fact and fiction. Also the relative innocent sensibilities of childhood are rapidly being confronted—in sitcoms, soap operas, cinema, and cyberspace—with the ethical issues normally only reserved for adulthood—issues such as sex, greed and power (Postman, 1988). In organizations information technology are placing managers in the position to have to make decisions between profits and the deskilling of workers. It is becoming a real choice between investing in machines and investing in people (Taylor & Williams, 1994). As more and more tasks are being delegated to machines many other ethical issues emerge such as responsibility, liability and security, to name but a few (Brunnstein, 1996; Clement & Wagner, 1996).

If ethical resources are less and less available, more fragmented, and more difficult to discern, and there is an exploding horizon of ethical issues, what is an appropriate response? A response could be to endeavour to develop society's ethical sensibilities through ethical arguments, principles and codes. For example, one could discern or agree a set of social norms behind a 'veil of ignorance' where all participants are neutral and have no indication of their eventual position or social status (Rawls, 1972). One could also propose Kant's categorical imperative to "act only according to the maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant, 1959 [1785]). One could turn to the "the sermon on the mount" of Jesus (Matt. 5: 1–20) or turn to the writings of the Buddha. One could be more specific and translate these meta-ethical principles into specific business or computing related codes of ethics (Berleur & d'Udekem-Gevers, 1996; Pourciau, 1996).

However, proposing these imperatives, principles and codes with enthusiasm and vigour does not release the sense of uneasiness within. The question remains: do we respond to actual obligations in factual life because we apply an imperative, principle or code? Or, do we rather find ourselves dragged into obligations by something that grabs us *from within* the event, situation, or disaster? Is the source of obligation in the code or in the particulars, the facticity, of the disaster? If it is in the disaster, as I will argue with the help of Caputo (1993), why do we so desperately want to set up codes which value seems mostly marginal (Harrington, 1996; Stevens, 1994)?

Is it that we want to give obligation some force, to make it safe—to make its claim as strong as possible? Can we make it safe? Somehow, in the situation, the application of codes and principles do not make obligations grab us. Neither do imperatives, fair and just rules, or any other meta-ethical category that we may want to call up in support or defence of obligation, such as God, Good, Justice, *Geist*, or Being. I will therefore argue with Caputo (1993) that obligation cannot be made safe. I will argue that obligation happens when it happens—that it consorts with disasters; and that the currency of obligations is not codes or principles but proper names with faces, singulars. As a result, obligations happen as part of my being-in-the-world. When I find myself in the world, doing what I do, I find myself in obligations—it is part of my *Befindlichkeit*. Furthermore, I will argue, using the work of Baudrillard, that information technology through mediation (simulation) is introd-

ucing a sense of hyperreality into our existence that is making it increasingly difficult for obligation to grab us, for us to come face to face with obligation. I will demonstrate how this notion of information technology, induced hyperreality, had dulled or deactivated the ethical sensibilities of Nick Leeson to the point where he took it on himself to gamble away the life savings, pensions, jobs, and careers of the many proper names attached to the Barings collapse.

To sum up: the purpose of this paper is to raise the daunting possibility that as our world becomes more and more hyperreal, through electronic mediation, not only Ethics (ethical theory and argument—for which I don't care much) but moral obligation (the actual call to sacrifice—for which I care deeply) itself may be at the stake. As we are propelled into the information society, an increasingly hyperreal world, it is the future of obligation not Ethics (as an intellectual enterprise) that disturbs me deeply. If this argument seems convincing, and not merely made of straw, then we as the designers and implementers of information systems and technology should become aware, open ourselves to, and face, the disaster that may be in the making.

2. Obligation, disaster and proper names

Why do moral obligations happen? With the notion of a *moral obligation* I have in mind a claim for which there exists no social or institution basis, no rational logos to make it reasonable. Neither are there benefits for assuming it. Furthermore, the taking up of the obligation may entail personal sacrifice beyond what can be viewed as reasonable. In spite of this 'irrational' basis people do respond to their moral obligations in everyday life. Why do we sometimes experience and respond to another's claim on us, even if it may mean enormous personal sacrifice? Are ethical sensibilities aroused by a rational reflection on Kant's imperative, for example, or maybe on the imperative 'to do unto others as I would want them to do unto me'? This may be true in removed ethical discourse, but it seems less likely in-the-world when faced with the abyss of disaster². I would argue that it is possible to *know* ethical responsibilities through ethical discourse. However, they are *experienced* in the facticity of the situation—when facing a face in a disaster. To know my obligations may be necessary but it is not sufficient for me to enact them. To enact them I need to *experience* them in the facticity of the situation. If this is so then we need to inquire about the source of this experience. I would argue with Don Caputo (1993) that obligations happen to us. When I find myself in factual life I find myself enmeshed in obligations, I experience them as part of my being-in-the-world (Introna, 1997). In involving myself in the world I tend to find obligations always already there—I never seem to arrive in time to find out where they came from (Heidegger,

² In a dramatic letter Maria von Herbert (1791), a keen and able student of Kant's philosophy, who was struggling with the ethical question of suicide in her own life wrote the following to Kant: "I've read the metaphysics of morals, and the categorical imperative, and it doesn't help a bit. My reason abandons me just when I need it" She did eventually take her own life. Langton (1994).

1962). They are just there. As I stumble through my everyday, I find myself coming face to a face with obligations. They seem to grab me, without my consent. They take hold of me, bind me, in a way that makes my claim to autonomy and freedom seem feeble and frivolous in the face of the urgency of the bond. Caputo (1993, pp. 7–8) makes this point most strikingly:

Obligation is a feeling, the feeling of being bound (*ligare*, *ob-ligare*, *re-ligare*), an element of my feeling *Befindlichkeit*, but I cannot get on top of it, scale its heights, catch a glimpse of its rising up. It comes at me, comes over me, overtakes me, seizes hold of me. As soon as I come to be I am already in its grasp. I have neither the will nor the means to deny it. When I am obliged I do not know by what dark powers I am held. I only know/feel/find myself caught up, in the midst of obligation, in its snare, in scandal, in panic—perhaps even blinded. If an obligation is ‘mine’ it is not because it belongs to me but because I belong to it. Obligation is not one more thing that I comprehend and want to do, but something that intervenes upon and disrupts the sphere of what the I wants, something that troubles and disturbs the I, that pulls the I out of the circle of the same, as Levinas would say.

In the face of the other, the particular person, obligation disturbs the calm waters of the I; it plucks the I out of its orbit. To obey it is not a matter of judging the relevance of a principle, it is rather a ‘choice about the effects of obedience or disobedience’ in-the-world—it is a kind of “Abrahamic *Befindlichkeit*” (Kierkegaard, 1985 [1843]). Obligation does not leave room for manoeuvre. It is not about a range of choices that I can weigh up in terms of each choice’s consequences (Bentham, 1948 [1789]). It is a matter of responding to what is possible here and now in the *Befindlichkeit*—in the being-bound—to that I am already in.

We cannot say where obligation comes from, what its home-ground, foundation, primordial source, or fundamental cause is. We can, nevertheless, say that obligations tend to consort with *disasters*. “A disaster is an economic notion....The disaster belongs to an economy of excessive cost, for which there is no compensating return. The disaster is an utter wasting, a sheer loss. There is no larger perspective, no larger whole, no totality in terms of which the loss can be reckoned part of an acceptable expenditure, an acceptable cost that one is willing to pay. Disasters throw all reckoning and cost-accounting, every *logos* and *ratio*, into chaos” Caputo (1993, p. 29). There are no ‘small’ or ‘big’ disasters, only disasters. Disasters do not lend themselves to be weighed for outcomes, results or consequences. To search for an outcome in a disaster is an extreme form of ‘obscenity’. Disasters do not produce a result, only victims with proper names—particular persons, with particular families, addresses, and so forth. Absolute singulars as Levinas would say.

Obligation consorts with disasters, it is a matter of being bound (*ligare*) to, grabbed by, a disaster in-the-world. It is not a matter of something *before* me, an informed choice, it is to be claimed by something that ‘has a hold on us, something that is older than us, that has us before we have it.’ Obligation is, however, not a subjectivistic notion. As Caputo (1993, p. 32) argues: “It is not an effect produced by a subject,

but rather something produced in me, as in a patient, something that happens to me... It is my unflagging supposition that there is something about suffering that stops us in our tracks...that we are laid hold of by others, seized and laid claim to, that the fullness of freedom is hollowed out by the hollow eyes of those who suffer.” The seizure does not depend on principle; the principle is, at most, a consolidation, after the fact, of being seized. Hence, we “do not judge the singular in virtue of the principle, but we draft the principle after the fact by excavating the singularity and erecting a relatively hollow schema—or ‘principle’—whose cash value is solely the singularities upon which it is drawn... We do not really apply principles to individual ‘cases’...we apply individuals to principle” Caputo (1993, p. 37). In the disaster, the ego and her categories shatter before the face of the other. The face of the other, the singular disturbs the ego, takes it hostage and shatters even the most reasonable of reasons.

Nevertheless, what if someone claims to be ‘indifferent to suffering, or, claiming nothing at all, simply walk away from suffering’. What then? What are we to do? The ‘cold truth’ is that we cannot force the claim of those who suffer. Whatever our good intentions, such forcing of the claim would not hold up. We cannot make the claim more forceful by calling to its defence meta-ethical categories as Caputo (1993) so eloquently argues for the child born with AIDS:

The claim of the child is finite and fragile. It is not absolutely commanding—not a Categorical Imperative that breaks through the world of appearances, nor the Form of the Good gradually being recalled, nor the traces of the Face of God showing up in the child’s face. Were any of these very beautiful hypotheses true, we would, perhaps, not let the conditions flourish under which these disasters occur with such savage regularity as we do. What law there is to come to the relief of the child *is inscribed only on the face of the child*, which is the face of suffering, and it does not extend beyond the singularity of the child. The child herself is the only law. In terms of metaphysico-ethical back-ups, the child is on her own. The child ‘is not a fact as it were of pure reason.’... [but] of factual life, a fact of flesh, of the power that flesh exerts over flesh, which is highly finite. No more. But no less. (p. 38, my emphasis)

But what if the obligation does not stick? We cannot *make* it stick. The best that we can do is to make the claim of the child burst forth in as many ways possible to make it as strong as possible, ‘to sound the alarm of disasters as loud as we can, and to make indifference look as bad as possible, as bad as its is.’ However, in ‘sounding the alarm’ we must be careful not to turn disasters into meanings, categories and themes.

Disasters are about particular *bodies* not meanings (such as law and order, the struggle, freedom, the people, the Law, the Faith, and so forth). Disasters have a face and a name, a proper name. The currency of obligations is proper names, particular individuals. We ‘know our obligations because we meet up with them, face to face.’ A victim with a name, a face and a body; these give the victim a change to make a disaster visible. Meanings hide disasters and make them fit our systems of cost

accounting. As the late Deng Xiaoping said of the Tiananmen Square massacre: ‘We can afford to spill a little blood [in the name of law and order].’ In an obligation, both the addressor and the addressee must ultimately bear proper names. It is *you* making a claim, an *ob-ligare*, on *me* to plunge myself into *y/our* disaster. Obligations are communicated between proper names. Proper names are the locale and limit of obligations. Proper names are the im/possibility of obligations. It is the naked solicitations of the face of the other that disturb us. Only as proper names can we be ‘in the others shoes’, be her proxy.

Obligation happens; obligation is fragile, it is on the surface, in the face, the eyes of the victims—victims with proper names. We cannot make obligation safe or strong—not secure or force its claim. Every attempt to force the claim will unravel the very source of the claim. It is the nakedness, the very straightforwardness of the other’s face that disturb us, puts us into question. The naked face of the other the ego looses its self-certain status and the self-evidence of her categories. We cannot choose our obligations, they will find us, grab us, in our *Befindlichkeit*. What can we do? We can sound the alarm. We can make proper names our business, the resolution, the scale of our life. If we live on the landscape of proper names obligations will claim us. If they do, then we *ought* to respond, as a proper name to a proper name, particular human being to a particular other human being, that is what obligation demands of us and what Ethics cannot do. But, what if obligation does not happen:

Obligations happen; they happen because they happen; they happen for the while that they happen. Then the cosmos draws a few more breaths, the little star grows cold, and the animals made of flesh have to die.

What happens when faces become representations, images, through electronic mediation? This is what I want to explore in the sections that follow.

3. Obligation, information technology and the hyperreal

The real for Baudrillard (1983) is dead; it is not merely dead it never existed. The assumed relationship between the *real* and the *representation* was itself an image—there is no sense in the distinction between:

- the map and the territory;
- the copy and the original;
- the fictional and the factual;
- the simulation and the real.

Baudrillard (1983, p. 2) concludes: “Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyper real. The territory no longer precedes the map. Nor survives

it. Henceforth, it is the map that precedes the territory—PRECESSION OF SIMULACRA—it is the map that engenders the territory...”

There are no foundations, no ultimate referent, everything is always already interpretation. Without a foundation that can act as the guiding principle—the judge as it were—of what is real or imitation, true or false, genuine or counterfeit, all distinctions become arbitrary. Baudrillard (1993, p. 5) confirms: “Strictly speaking, nothing remains for us to base anything on. All that remains for us is theoretical violence—speculation to the death, whose only method is the radicalisation of hypotheses.” Distinctions now become the outcome of the microphysics of power, local language games, regimes of truth, intersubjective agreements; and at the end of this spectrum Baudrillard’s total anarchism. All distinctions must be made plastic by self-referentiality. This is the “logic of simulation which has nothing to do with a logic of facts and an order of reasons. Simulation is characterised by a *precession of the model*, of all models around the merest fact—the models come first, and their orbital circulation constitutes the genuine magnetic field of events” (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 31). All are simulations; the models ‘create’ the facts. Facts have no sense of their own, they circulate the models in an infinite regression.

To understand Baudrillard’s argument one could expand his successive phases of the image—maybe one can also call it the biography of reality—as indicated in Table 1 below (Baudrillard, 1983, p. 11). I will start the discussion in phase three. Baudrillard argues that the real is *fabricated by staging its negative*. For example, he explains that Disneyland is staged so that we can say Disneyland is ‘make believe’ (imaginary) and the world that surrounds Disneyland (Los Angeles and the rest of America) is real. In a similar manner we stage criminality so that we can fabricate a system of justice that is seen as legitimate. In staging the negative we fabricate (or make sensible) distinctions such as real and imaginary, true and false, right and wrong. As Baudrillard (1983, p. 25) argues: “The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false; it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate *in reverse* the fiction of the real” (my emphasis). In the face of the postmodern nihilism the modern society is becoming desperate in its efforts to preserve the real. This is seen in the proliferation of the staging of the negative. The proving of the real by staging the imaginary is now exploding: the proving of the truth through scandal; the proving of the law by transgression; proving work by strike, etc. In the mass media, in the information society, this staging is most apparent: “Instead of facilitating communication, it exhausts itself *staging* communication. Instead of producing meaning, it

Table 1
The successive phases of the *Image*

Successive phases of the <i>image</i>	‘Reality’
1. It is the reflection of a basic reality	Essence, substance
2. It masks and perverts a basic reality	‘There’ but inaccessible
3. It masks the absence of a basic reality	Is fabricated
4. It bears no relation to any reality	Self-referential simulation

wears itself out staging it. This is the gigantic simulation-process with which we are familiar: non-directive interviews, phone-ins, all-round participation, verbal black-mail—you're involved, the event is you,..." (Baudrillard, 1980, p. 139).

In the final phase of the image any pretence to the real is lost as the system becomes self-referential and a law unto itself. This is the stage of the hyperreal: "the collapse of reality into hyperrealism, the meticulous reduplication of the real, preferably through another reproductive medium such as advertising or photography [or cyberspace and virtual reality]. Through reproduction from one medium into another the real becomes volatile, it becomes the allegory of death, but it also draws strength from its own destruction, becoming the real for its own sake, a fetishism of the lost object *which is no longer the object of representation*, but the ecstasy of denigration and its own ritual extermination: the hyperreal." [Baudrillard, 1993 #18, p. 72] In the hyperreal the crisis of representation that have occupied the modern mind for so long is overcome with the real sealed off in a circle of pure repetition.

In the epoch of the hyperreal the real is now "that which it is possible to provide an equivalent reproduction... At the end of the process of reproducibility, the real is not only that which can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced: the hyperreal" (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 73). It is clear from the above brief analysis that there is an infinite regress in the logic of Baudrillard. We stage the imaginary to fabricate (simulate) the real. The simulation becomes a simulation of a simulation that accelerates us into the dimension of the hyperreal. In the hyperreal everything is already simulation; everything is always already reproduction.

Considering the ideas of Baudrillard, Taylor and Saarinen (1994) developed a media philosophy they call *Imagology*. In their book (which is itself thoroughly post-modern) Taylor and Saarinen apply the ideas of Baudrillard to media and more specifically to information technology. What sort of world is the world of the hyperreal? This is the world of the *Simcult*—as they call it. It is a world of excess, outrage and anarchy. The following phrases from their book provide a glimpse of this world of the simulacra, the simcult:

- in simcult, excess becomes excessive (2:2)³;
- to survive in simcult, one must learn to live the impossibility of disillusionment;
- in the culture of the simulacrum, everything becomes current and only the current is 'real' (2:4);
- the threat of simcult is that outrage becomes unfashionable;
- simcult presupposes the commodification of commodification;
- simcult is a culture of instrumentality and nothing but instrumentality (2:6);
- when every foundation is imaginary, alienation becomes impossible (2:8);
- the register of the imaginary is anarchic (2:9);
- in simcult, we have no intellectually secure foundation for anything (10:10);

³ Taylor and Saarinen do not use page numbers in their book. They have 25 topics or 'chapters'. The pages of each topic is separately numbered. I will use the following convention (n:m) where 'n' refers to the topic number and 'm' refers to the page number within a topic.

- Disneyworld is the porodic embodiment of simcult (9:2).

Simcult is the vision, almost a type of prototype, of the world that the simulacra engenders. It is the world that is more real than real; it is hyperreal. The ‘place’ of the simcult is “the electronetwork that mediaizes the real...the mediatrix” (1:5). It is the world of code. When reality is in binary code it can be infinitely reproduced; it enters the realm of the hyperreal. An archetype for the simcult (the ‘mediatrix’) is what has become known as *cyberspace*. The electonetwork of the Internet, the World Wide Web, telecommunications networks, corporate and state administration databases, multi-user dungeons (MUDs), electronic mail, electronic meeting systems (EMS), video conferencing, computer supported co-operative work (CSCW), electronic banking systems, electronic commerce, electronic markets, and so forth. Through electronic mediation reality can be infinitely reproduced; it enters the realm of the hyperreal. Gone are the days of the original, the territory, the factual, the real. What now?

It is my supposition that electronic mediation with its hyperreal effect—even if we do not take it to its Baudrillardian extreme—is turning disasters into hyperreal events and proper names into meaningless electronic representations; hyperreal events and representations that come *before* us, but do not *involve* us. In hyperreality we are less and less likely to meet our obligations face to face. This is why I believe the world was able to turn the Gulf War into a television spectacle and watch jet fighters bomb enemy targets, not people with names and faces, just images on the screen that explode—like in Rambo or Death Wish-II. I will not try to prove this supposition. I suspect one could develop many forms of phenomenological description and empirical studies to attempt this. I will not do it here—mostly because I cannot give the claim of the other force by proving it. I cannot make obligation safe, it will happen or not. Nevertheless, I want to discuss this supposition by looking at the collapse of the Barings bank and the role of Nick Leeson in this event in which a multitudinous number of proper names, with faces, suffered. It is my contention that this disaster was possible because Leeson could not see the faces of proper names—he did not become disturbed. This left him self-certain and rendered his immoral actions obvious and self-evident to him. In his hyperreal world he could simply not come face to a face—just images presented on screens, numbers moving from screens to paper and back.

4. Obligation, hyperreality and Nick Leeson

‘See you later!’ I called out to nobody in particular. In the lift I called Lisa and told her I’d pick her up in five minutes. I put my phone back in my pocket and it immediately rang. I pulled it out and looked at it. Then I switched it off. It was time to run.

This is how Nick Leeson describes the event of leaving Barings Bank with an esti-

mated £830 million losses—he merely switched it off. He was used to switching off. He switched off the Reuters screens if the market went against him. He ‘switched off’ the trading losses by booking it to account 88888. For Nick Leeson life was something you could switch off if you did not like it, it was only a representation, hyperreal, a very complex computer game.

Nick Leeson of the Barings Bank disaster was a citizen of hyperreality. Leeson was not ‘really’ investing—gambling with—the pensions and life-savings of proper names such as Charles Smith from Plymouth or Irene Jones from Cambridge. He was playing a money game (a sort of electronic blackjack) in hyperreality. He was betting with digital chips where the number of zeros on his computer screen was the only indicator of the size of his wager. Nick Leeson’s world was hyperreal in two ways, in what he did and in the way he did it.

He traded in the international money markets with *derivative* financial instruments (options, futures, etc.). These derivative financial instruments are hyperreal. Essentially a trader buys and sells movements in the market, ‘abstract numbers’. The trader buys and sells the probability of market movement—which exists only in the cumulative representation (on the computer) of individual transactions at a lower level of representation (the stock exchange). For example the Nikkei future contracts, which were responsible for the major Baring losses, can be described as: instruments which are representations of intentions (future contracts) to buy or sell representations (Nikkei index), of representations (shares) of real things (industrial companies) involving proper names.

In these derivative financial markets—which exists only as electronic movements on a screen—everything becomes severed from any reference to an original; it is a circle of pure repetition, pure fiction. This was also how Nick Leeson saw it. For him it was not ‘real cash’ it was just numbers on the screen as the following two quotes from his book (Leeson & Whitley, 1996) indicates

I turned off my Reuters screen and the green flickering figures died an instant quiet death. They were just numbers on a screen, nothing to do with real cash. (p. 2)

We just had to buy and sell abstract numbers for a living. They were big, but they were unreal and they changed with astonishing speed. (p. 99)

Not only was the market hyperreal, but also the way it was done. In the dealing room or on the trading floor of the exchange, aside from telephones and the news screens, there is little contact with the outside world. Most of the day is spent behind desks, crammed with computer screens, buying and selling movements on the screen. The traders live and breathe markets and as a result many live a dangerously isolated existence (Rawnsley, 1995). On the floor there is a world of screen movements, jackets, signals and trades that all push each other to and fro. It is a world where one signal can make you a lot of money or lose you a lot of money. It is a world

that is current, frantic and instant—even money, according to Leeson was instant. He describes his first experience on the trading floor:

Now, out on the trading floor, I could work with *instant money*—it was hanging in the air right in front of me, invisible but highly charged, just waiting to be earthed. As I watched the traders all screaming at each other in their red jackets, I imagined an electrical thunderstorm. There was lightning in the air, and all I had to do was give the right signals and it would charge through me as if I were a copper conductor (Leeson & Whitley, 1996, p. 33, my emphasis).

Unfortunately, for Leeson it was more instant losses rather than instant gains. This is not unusual in itself. By trading in a volatile market you make on some trades and you lose on others. In Leeson's case, however, he made the losses go away—switched them off—by putting them into a hidden account (88888). Initially it was only £20,000 but this escalated rapidly as he redoubled to recoup his losses: “To make any inroads into my losses—which now towered over £200 million—I had to double up.” He did not see it as a disaster because it was only “a paper loss”: “I'd grown used to the size of the figures—it had a paper loss of over £30 million” (Leeson & Whitley, 1996, p. 181).

The important question for me is why this young man from Watford (north of London) who according to everybody was a decent, sincere and well mannered person, not come face to face with obligation? On all accounts he was, at least outwardly in his daily life, a fairly moral person. What made him unwittingly trample obligation under his feet? How did he find himself in a disaster that distributed suffering on such an unprecedented scale to so many proper names? How did he persistently look past, or over, the sea of names and faces and not blink—the faces of his family, the families of those who lost their jobs and careers, those who lost their life savings and pensions and those that depended on them, down to the needy who suffer because of a loss of £50,000 charity funds by the Downside public school (Miller, 1997).

It is my supposition that he could not blink because he could not see those faces. He was wholly unable to come face to face with obligation. He had no way of reckoning the cost. In his hyperreal world he was unable to deal in the economy of sheer loss of utter wasting. In his world he could merely move the things on the screen and phone to London for more money (by electronic transfer). He could even create £50 million on paper and not blink: “With my scissors, stick of paper glue and fax machine, I had created £50 million. Coopers & Lybrand, world class auditors, had agreed the figures. Barings, a world-class merchant bank, was holed by £50 million” (Leeson & Whitley, 1996, p. 189). His inability to see the names and faces of the victims in the disaster is best summarised by his public statement after his arrest: “I did not steal any money. I hope that is clear to everybody.”

One could now step back and say that this is an extreme example of hyperreality. One could also argue that Nick Leeson may be one of those people who are indifferent to suffering, who can simply walk away from it. This may or may not be true. I do not want to force my argument to make it more convincing. I merely want to raise the daunting possibility that, as we accelerate to the much hailed information

society, electronic mediation may be eroding the possibility of us coming face to face with our obligations. I want to propose that we keep the scale of our existence on the landscape of proper names. In the landscape of representation, of simulation, there are no faces only pictures—pictures to be consumed according to our categories. In the (re)presentations, the images on the screen, the voices of the other become faint and disappear. It is my contention that electronic mediation distances us from the face of the other—we remain undisturbed in our self-certainty.

Obviously, this can also happen in the face to face situation. Through the mediation of our categories, we turn actual people into instances of our categories. It is easy to commit violence to a category—people as instances are less than whole persons. This happens, even face to face. My contention is however, that electronic mediation adds yet another layer (or layers) of mediation in an already saturated world of mediation. As such, it distances us even more from the possibilities of experiencing our obligations—of coming face to a face. If we cannot make obligation safe, we can at least improve the possibility of us seeing its face, of experiencing our being bound (*ligare*) by it.

5. What now?

If we cannot make obligation safe, if we do not have recourse to meta-physical categories to make the claim of obligation strong, what now? What may be an appropriate response.

I do not believe it to be of value to try and ‘code’ obligation. The flood of ethical codes prepared by organizations such as the ACM and IFIP (Berleur & d’Udekem-Gevers, 1996) are in my view a non-sensible response. Codes will not engender obligation—unless you put in place regimes of discipline (Foucault, 1977) to force it, which have been suggested by some (Berleur & d’Udekem-Gevers, 1996). Even the coding of obligation into methodology (Mumford & Weir, 1979; Rogerson, 1996) seems to me to be inappropriate. Obligation needs a face and a proper name. We must experience it not merely know it.

In confronting hyperreality, we do not need rules, principles and arguments. I believe we need to get faces and proper names together, break through mediation—mediation of categories, principles, concepts, representation, commodities, to name a few. We must get those who command, construct, recommend, and so forth to meet face to a face with those who will be affected by their commands, constructions and recommendations. Let flesh meet flesh. We do not need codes. We need to become *involved* in the world, it is in being—in that we will experience our being bound—to. In our involvement obligation will happen if it will happen, if not then not. We cannot *make* it happen, it is only as strong and no more.

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