

Social Media vs. Schopenhauer: The Porcupine Dilemma

By Manon Carrié

In 1893, German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer recounted a fable regarding the paradoxical nature of man in his *Parerga and Paralipomena: A Collection of Philosophical Essays*. The fable illustrates a group of porcupines huddled together for warmth on a cold winter's day, whose efforts are thwarted when they discover that in drawing too close they inevitably stick one another with their needles, and they must again withdraw to a frostier distance. When the cold intensifies, they attempt to draw closer once more, only to suffer the same prickliness. In this way, they converge and diverge, continuously seeking balance between the undesirable features of their makeup and their need for intimacy.

The parallel between the disillusioned porcupine and the conflicted human is all too evident. We, too, crave connection and warmth, yet that prospect is often foiled by the sudden and miraculous appearance of our vices. Family gatherings end in dispute; jealousy accompanies the surge of love. As Sartre so bluntly put: "*Hell is other people.*" Enter Social Media: Facebook, Instagram, Twitter; intangible replicas of social spheres, accessible at the participant's discretion, and removed from the demands of corporeality. Ongoings of both intimate relations and fleeting acquaintances were suddenly accessible at a comfortable arm's length. Social Media offered relief from the discomfort of face-to-face contact, and imparted an ideal distance between each prickly being, while still allowing connection to thrive.

But while the initial appeal of Social Media existed in its interpersonal design, the attraction has quickly expanded from local interaction to widespread networking. We avidly absorb information regarding celebrities, organizations and world matters, regardless of legitimacy. We readily showcase our merits to an unknown audience, rather than cultivate profound relationships. It is no longer a matter of warmth on a winter's day, but a *compulsion* to envelop oneself in a continuous supply of heat, and intoxicate oneself in the illusion of communicative ecstasy. The value of connection has shifted from reciprocal interaction to egocentric performance; mutual benefit to personal advantage; quantity over quality. Social Media as a remedy to our thorny condition has revealed itself as a facilitator of not only the expansion of communication, but also the extension of human vice within it.

While it is true that finding a perfect, balanced distance between each prickly animal may beget a temporary comfort, it is important to remember: the spikes of a porcupine continue to grow. Perhaps the ideal social landscape where harmonious communication can flourish does indeed exist in our future. Yet, while we endeavour to change the cold of winter, perhaps the cure we so desperately seek does not lie in the landscape, but in the evolution of the porcupine. Social Media can only provide so much buffer between us before our vices adapt and reach one another again, amplified and more developed. Until we better understand the nature of our needles, the cycle of pricking will continue, perhaps from threatening new angles in the infinite realm of cyberspace.