Proper Distance: Towards an ethics for cyberspace

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It is only in approaching the Other that I attend to myself …. In discourse I expose myself to the questioning of the Other, and this urgency of the response – acuteness of the present – engenders me for responsibility; as responsible I am brought to my final reality (Levinas, 1969, 178).

This is an essay in media ethics. And as such it is neither easy nor fashionable. It attempts a critical engagement with a range of theories and positions that touch on community and identity, on reciprocity and responsibility, and above all that touch on the way in which media, and especially the new medium of the Internet, might be seen to enable or disable what I will call the moral life. The ethics I intend are not specific.   I will not be arguing about particular individual, institutional or professional ethics in defined circumstances. I will not be making recommendations on how people should behave either on-line or off-line. I will not be drafting an ethical code. I will not be discussing netiquette.

In this sense maybe the word ethical should be substituted for ethics, and in this sense too the ethical elides with the moral, with what I have already called the moral life. It is this, the moral life, and the conditions of its possibility in electronic space, that provides my focus in what follows.

This is also an essay in metaphysics, since it draws on what I have understood from the work of the French philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who resolutely refuses a singular ontology as a basis for understanding the human condition in favour of an – admittedly often somewhat equally unhistorical and unsociological – approach grounded in transcendence and critique. However I would contend that metaphysics, in my case as in Levinas's, provides a basis for measuring history, society and technology – and for calling all of them to account.

My own concern, therefore, is also critique: to interrogate both the claims for, and the consequences of, the increasingly intense and interactive mediation of social relations by information and communication technologies. I will

argue that the possibility of a moral life is dependent upon our capacity to define and sustain a *proper distance* in the relationships we have between ourselves and others, and that our media technologies can be seen to affect that. I will suggest that claims that the Internet is capable of providing new, more intense, more genuine, forms of social relationships are based on unexamined notions of what social relationships are or could be.

In one obvious sense it would be perfectly reasonable to suggest that this is not a new argument; that we know already that electronic mediation is no substitute for the face-to face, and that whatever value we ascribe to the latter, it is not transferable once distances are mediated. But while the basic argument which I attempt to outline in what follows is recognisable and familiar, I hope I will be able to throw some new light upon it as I try to define the elements of a position which, at least, offers the terms for a debate on the moral consequences of electronic mediation. I would hope, too, that it would also contribute to the increasingly urgent questions of morality in society more generally.

1. Infinity

I will begin with me.

As a child I would, from time to time, write my name and address as follows:

Roger Saul Silverstone
21 Brancote Road
Oxton
Birkenhead
Cheshire, England, UK, Europe, the World, the Solar System, the Universe, Infinity.

And in so doing I would move, progressively, from the known to the unknown, though with me always, and of course, at the centre. But in this projection of

myself from the apparent security of home to the increasing distance and incomprehensibility of what was beyond reach and actually beyond imagination, I was at the same time displacing myself from the centre, and in that displacement acknowledging, albeit unconsciously, that I was just a speck. That movement through the ether was both an extension of my power and the force of my identity into global space and simultaneously an expression of the insignificance of that power and the weakness and vulnerability of that identity.

There was, in my childhood fantasy, somewhere else, something else, something that I could not comprehend but which I knew existed, and which, arguably, by virtue of my knowledge of its existence gave a certain reality to my own.

Réné Descartes had a similar - but a rather more radical - thought. Towards the end of his Third Meditation he had this to say:

> And I must not imagine that I do not apprehend the infinite by a true idea, but only by the negation of the finite, in the same way that I comprehend repose and darkness by the negation of motion and light: since, on the contrary, I clearly perceive that there is more reality in the infinite substance than in the finite, and therefore that in some way I possess the perception … of the infinite before that of the finite, that is, the perception of God before that of myself, for how could I know that I doubt, desire, or that something is wanting in me, and that I am not wholly perfect, if I possessed no idea of a being more perfect than myself, by comparison of which I knew the deficiencies of nature (1940, 78).

The key idea here lies in the second half of this. It is the argument that there is something which we know, or have a sense of, which precedes our capacity to be: there is something before being; something which limits our being and is irreducible to our being. There is something out there which in no way can be held or contained or even understood fully. It is this recognition which makes us human, because through it we see our limits, and we gain a measure of our strengths and weaknesses. In such acknowledgement we can come to terms with the reality of our doubts and desires, and that in

recognising this reality we can claim our humanity; the painful acceptance of our vulnerability.

Emmanuel Levinas takes this idea as the foundation of his moral philosophy and uses it as the stick with which to beat much of modern Western thinking, particularly the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, for its reductive insistence on the singularity of the self as the locus of experience and as the foundation of being. Levinas takes issue with modernism's dreams of omnipotence, drawing a fundamental ethical lesson, negatively, from this reduction. It is because there will always be something that we know we can not know, and that there will always be something, someone, some aspect of someone, beyond our reach and beyond our comprehension; something, perhaps only metaphorically, that precedes us, that we can discover who we are. But, most crucially – and I will come back to this shortly – we learn through this recognition of the irreducible otherness of the world to accept our responsibility for our place in the world, and for the other who occupies that world alongside us, and who we will never, ever, know quite entirely.

It is this argument that I want briefly to trace, for it opens up, as it has also for Zygmunt Bauman, an agenda for understanding the limits of moral sensibility as it has emerged through modernity, and which in both Bauman's arguments and my own, find their way into a critique of technology and mediation. Bauman's ambition lies in the exploration of what he calls a post-modern ethics; mine, more modestly, is to explore the idea of what I am calling *proper distance*.

2. Proper Distance

What do I mean by *proper distance*? There are a number of different ways of answering the question.

Let me begin etymologically, and say something about the word *proper.* The word proper (*proprius*, Latin, meaning ones own, special, particular, peculiar) has, in English, a number of related but quite distinct meanings which make it

both useful and suggestive in the context of what I want to say. *Proper* has both descriptive and evaluative senses. Its first meaning refers to the sense of belonging: it is a property or a quality of a thing – the stars, for example, have their proper motion. It is also refers to that quality of ownership as being distinctive – a proper name as opposed to a common name.

The second meaning emerges when the term is applied to a situation of conformity with a rule: when something is accurate, exact or correct, or when something is strictly the case, genuine, true or real, we use the word proper. So when something or someone is excellent, admirable, commendable, fine, goodly, or of high quality, we can say of it or them, perhaps slightly archaically, that they are proper, a proper person.

Thirdly we use the word proper to refer to something that is adapted to some purpose or requirement, that it is fit, apt, suitable; fitting or befitting; or when it is especially appropriate to the circumstances or conditions at hand. In this sense proper is what something should be or what is required; what one ought to do or have or use. It is a synonym, almost, for right; for example one might say that this is a proper time to do something. Such a sense, finally, leads to a use of the word proper to describe and adjudge something or someone that conforms with social ethics, or with the demands or usages of society, polite or otherwise. We talk about behaving properly, or improperly.

Proper is not a word we use much in media or new media research. It is a modern rather than a post-modern term. It speaks of value: of the normative, as well as of the descriptive. But in its principal manifestations – as distinctive, correct, and ethically or socially appropriate – it commends itself to me, properly, as a way of approaching the question of distance, and of providing an opening into a critical enquiry of the ethics of the media, both old and new.

And so to distance. There is often quite a fundamental confusion in much of the writing on the new geography of the Internet. Time-space distanciation, or compression, or what Frances Cairncross (1997) has called the death of

distance, suggest a profound and illegitimate elision between two kinds of distance: the spatial and the social. The presumption in these discussions is that the electronic mediation of physical or material connection provides at the same time, social or psychic connection. The technologically enabled transformation of time and space that marked the entry into the modern world certainly provided new conditions and possibilities for communication, communication that provided connection despite physical separation. Yet the paradoxes at the heart of such communication, while noted as Ithiel de Sola Pool (1977), for example, famously noted them, have been insufficiently investigated, above all for their consequences for our relationships to each other. My point is that distance is not just a material, a geographical or even a social category, but it is, by virtue of both and as a product of their interrelation, a moral category. The overcoming of distance requires more than technology and indeed more than the creation of a public sphere. It requires proximity.

Zygmunt Bauman (1993) makes the following assertion:

> Modern society specialised in the refurbishment of the social space: it aimed at the creation of a public space in which there was to be *no moral proximity*. Proximity is the realm of intimacy and morality; distance is the realm of estrangement and the Law …(83) … If postmodernity is a retreat from the blind alleys into which radically pursued ambitions of modernity have led, a postmodern ethics would be one that readmits the Other as a neighbour, as the close-to-hand-*and*-mind, into the hard core of the moral self, back from the wasteland of calculated interests to which it had been exiled; an ethics that restores the autonomous moral significance of proximity; an ethics that recasts the Other as the crucial character in the process through which the moral self comes into its own (84)

Proximity is close here to what I have called proper distance. Proper distance involves contact – the close to hand but also to mind (Levinas, 1981/1998, 86). Bauman, in his analysis of the proximal and of the ethics of distance traces modernity's progressive refusal of the intimate and the individually responsible, a refusal which the activities of law and the State paradoxically impose on social life. Technology is a crucial component of this process, and horrendously so in his analysis of the Holocaust. Proximity involves also, as

we shall see, responsibility. And responsibility, individual responsibility, has also been progressively denied by modernity and its technological handmaidens.

However where Bauman sees proximity as a synonym for closeness, and sees in technology an ethical juggernaut, I want to pose proper distance as a firmer basis for enquiring into the possibilities of a moral life, and I want to push back somewhat from the technologically determinant. In the relation to the first, it should be pointed out (Silverstone, 1999) that we can be blinded morally by the too close at hand just as easily as we can be by the too far removed. Closeness, even intimacy, does not guarantee recognition or responsibility; it can invite, conceivably, either blank resistance or, alternatively, incorporation. As Levinas (1981/98 86) notes:

> Proximity is to be described as extending the subject in its very subjectivity … [Proximity], the one-for-the-other … is not a configuration produced in the soul. It is an immediacy older than the abstractness of nature. Nor is it fusion; it is contact with the other. To be in contact is neither to invest the other and annul his alterity, nor to suppress myself in the other. In contact itself the touching and the touched separate, as though the touched moved off, was always already other, did not have anything in common with me.

Levinas's notion of proximity preserves the separation of myself and the other, a separation which ensures the possibilities of both respect and responsibility for the other. It is a separation in which the notion of touch (elsewhere he writes of the caress) is central. For touch requires the sensitivity of, and to, distance in which there is recognition of the irreducible difference of the other as well as a sharing of identity with her or him. It is in this paradox of connection and separateness and in the ambiguities which we as individuals have to resolve in our relationships with the other, that the creation of an ethical or moral life becomes, or does not become, possible.

I am proposing that the notion, but above all the achievement, of proper distance both sensitises us to these ambiguities and provides the opportunity to surmount them. It recognises that in our relationships to each other, in their flux and fluidity, we are confronted by a whole range of technological and

discursive mediations which destabilise – in both directions – the proper distance that we must create and sustain if we are to act ethically. We have to determine – perhaps case by case – what that proper distance is or might be when we are confronted with both familiar and novel appearances or representations of the other.   And we have to understand, of course, that in such cases there is no *pris fixe*, no singular, and no permanent. Proper distance, like everything else that is meaningful in social life, can neither be taken for granted nor is it pre-given. It has to be worked for. It has to be produced.

Distance can be proper (correct, distinctive and ethically appropriate) or it can be improper. If improper distance can be, and is, created both through the general waxing and waning of modernity, as well as more precisely in the mediations that electronic technologies provide for us, then it follows that we can use the notion of *proper* distance as a tool to measure and to repair our failures in our communication with the other and in our reporting of the world, in such a way as our capacity to act is enabled and preserved (cf. Boltanski, 1999). And it follows too that we can use it as a way of interrogating those arguments, most recently in the analysis of the Internet, that mistake connection for closeness, and closeness for commitment, and which confuse reciprocity for responsibility.

But before we do this in a more deliberative way, it is necessary to dig a little more deeply into the nature of that ethical relation and the conditions of its possibility.

3. Strangers and neighbours

The media, that is the broadcast media, have always fulfilled the function of creating some sense of proper distance, or at least they have tried, or claimed to be able, to do so. The reporting of world events, the production of news, the fictional representation of the past, the critical interrogation of the private lives of public figures, the exploration of the ordinariness of everyday life, all involve in one way or another, a negotiation between the familiar and the

strange, as the media try, forlornly, to resolve the essential ambiguities and ambivalences of contemporary life. As I have argued on many occasions, their task is to create some kind of comfort and pleasure for those on the receiving end of such mediations, some comfort and pleasure in the appearance of the strange as not too strange and the familiar as not too familiar. However such mediations also tend to produce, in practice, a kind of polarisation in the determinations of such distance – that the unfamiliar is either pushed to a point beyond strangeness, beyond reach and beyond humanity on the one hand (the Iraqi leadership both during the Gulf war and now); or drawn so close as to be indistinguishable from ourselves on the other (the many representations of the everyday lives of citizens in other countries, as if the latter were in every respect just like us, really) (Silverstone, 1999).

The new media, especially the Internet, in palpably challenging the one to many mediation of television, radio and the press, and notwithstanding their evolutionary development from other forms of one-to-one electronic mediation, shift the terms of both the debate and the problem. They do so precisely in so far as they do enable that one-to-oneness, or that many-to-manyness, which e-mails and chat-rooms and groupware offer. And it is this arguably transcendent characteristic, which involves, or might be called the personalisation of the other – that the person at the other end of the communication is a person rather than a thing, or an image or an event, and that I may be required to interact with that other, or she with me – this personalisation is what I want now to evaluate. The Internet's claim is for interactivity – not uniquely perhaps – but centrally and essentially (Downes and McMillan, 2000). But the notion of interactivity begs a number of questions; above all about its very nature and its capacity to connect interlocutors in new and significant ways. It also raises the question – though this has not been much discussed in the literature – of the moral status of those who communicate with each other, and of the ethical status of the kind of communications that are generated, on-line.

I want to suggest that this question of status requires, initially at least, a consideration of the difference between strangers and neighbours, and it

requires, in a rather more focused way than I have yet attempted, a consideration of the difference between physical and social distance.

In pre-modern societies the differences between neighbours and strangers, or aliens, were rigidly enforced and accepted. Bauman (1993, 150) suggests that for a large part of human history "an alien could enter the radius of physical proximity only in one of three capacities: either as an enemy to be fought and expelled, or as an admittedly temporary guest to be confined to special quarters and rendered harmless by strict observance of the isolating ritual, or as a neighbour-to-be, in which case he had to be made like [a] neighbour, that is to behave like the neighbours do".

Modernity undermined the clarity, certainty and defensibility of the boundary between strangers and neighbours. As Georg Simmel has famously noted, the stranger is "the wanderer who comes today *and stays tomorrow*" and is close to us "insofar as we feel between him and ourselves similarities of nationality or social position, of occupation or of general human nature. He is far from us insofar as these similarities extend beyond him and us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people" (1971, 147, my italics). What characterises the stranger in modernity is precisely her ambiguity.

We can neither avoid her, nor can we be sure of her status, and indeed of our own status as she might judge it (we are all strangers to each other now). In a world of both geographical and social mobility – what Bauman (2000) calls liquid modernity, and John Urry (2000) calls the post-societal – we are confronted, perhaps as never before, by a nomadic universe, where the cognitive, aesthetic and moral boundaries between ourselves and others can neither be clearly identified nor consistently defended. We can not be indifferent to, nor exclude, the stranger who can no longer be defined by her difference. Yet we can not, because of that indefinable difference, completely include her either. The stranger *is* the neighbour, and we are all neighbours to one another now.

This is the problem of what I want to call *ambiguity 1*, the ambiguity which is inevitable when relationships with the other require the creation of manageable social *distance* under circumstances of otherwise determined physical *closeness*. And because both the cognitive and aesthetic spacing in our relationships to strangers is, in modern life, such a continuous problem, it produces ambivalence, a sense of moral and ethical indecisiveness in our relationships with the other.

I want to go further to suggest, however, that in electronic space these positionings are reversed, and that the problem of the stranger is, consequently, the obverse to what it is in physical space. Though it is still a problem. In electronic space we are confronted with the situation of determined, and arguably uniform, physical *distance*, and the moral task is, somehow or another, to create manageable social *closeness*. This is the problem of what I want to call *ambiguity 2*. But I want to suggest that it is generated by, and generates, similar ambivalence, an ambivalence present therefore both in physical and cyber space, an ambivalence which requires an equivalent, and an equivalently difficult, moral response. Are there any strangers in cyber-space? Are there any neighbours?

This ambivalence comes from not knowing just how to make sense of the other, but also from not knowing how to act in relation to the other. How to be, how to care, how to take responsibility. In the multiply converging worlds of technology, mediation and social and geographical mobilities, it may be, as many have argued, that we are doomed to ambiguity and ambivalence – but this does not mean that we should avoid confronting it.

4. The Face

Back to Levinas. There are limits to reason. It is precisely because we can not know, fully comprehend, the other that we have to accept our own limits and recognise there will always be something that escapes us. For Levinas this escape is the source of humility, a necessary humility in the face of the other, and a necessary precondition for our capacity to care for the other.

Levinas' concept of the Face is one of his most obscure but at the same time his most powerful. In trying to provide an account of it and its relevance to my own arguments I am fully aware of its difficulties (at least of some them) and my inadequacies (at least most of them). But the effort must be made, for I want to suggest that the notion of the Face is of particular and unexpected relevance to an understanding of the morality of cyber-space:

> The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we here name the face … The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea existing to my own measure and to the measure of its *ideatum* – the adequate idea … It is therefore to *receive* – from the Other beyond the capacity of the I, which means exactly: to have the idea of infinity. But this also means: to be thought. The relation with the Other, or Conversation, is a non-allergic relation, an ethical relation; but inasmuch as it is welcomed this conversation is a teaching (Levinas, 1969, 50-51).

The face, in Levinas's philosophy, is not a physical face. It does not depend on material presence. It is, literally, meta-physical. It exists as a commanding difference: different from me, but by virtue of that difference requiring a response from me. Levinas' concept of the Face is a precondition for ethics, for a moral position, for it forces us to recognise the responsibility we have for the other, whoever or whatever the other is. The Other (Levinas in this text instates the other as Other, as, perhaps, a proper subject) escapes our power, is different from us. We must recognise her presence, but also our own limitations in relation to her. The Other is a stranger, despite our capacity to identify with her: the pronoun "we", says Levinas, "is not a plural of the I … He and I do not form a number" (1969, 38-9). Whereas the Other exists only in my recognition of her, the reverse is also the case, and indeed for Levinas, the Other precedes me – enables me, and requires me to take her into account, and to care.

This impossibly difficult discourse has to be understood as a struggle with language and with the dominant discourses of rationality that frame and characterise modernity and the Enlightenment. It also has to be understood

as an attempt by Levinas to establish the primacy of the ethical in social life, "the primacy of the ethical, that is, the relationship of man to man – signification, teaching, justice – a primacy of an irreducible structure upon which other structures rest" (79). There is, in other words something before being. And it is that something – he calls it responsibility – which is, I believe a key notion in any viable struggling towards an ethics for cyberspace.

Perhaps the easiest way of approaching the distinctiveness of what is being said here, is to return to the notion of proper distance.

My responsibility for the other does not, if it is to have the moral force Levinas intends, require, or depend on, reciprocity. There is a necessary asymmetry in the moral position: an acknowledgement of the primacy of myself as the starting point, but no expectation that there will be feedback, and that I will receive what I have given, The ethical stance, from this perspective, does not depend on identification with the other, as neighbour, but on a recognition that I have as much responsibility for the stranger, that other who is, either physically or metaphysically, far from me, as I do for my neighbour. This is, in many ways, quite crucial. It sees the possibility of a moral life only being grounded in the asymmetry of social relations; that morality can not emerge from the symmetry of the reciprocal; that it can not be based on the expectation that my action will in some way require you to do the same for me. Nor can it be based on identification with the other, even though I am entirely dependent on her presence. My responsibility precedes me. I have no choice.

In physical space, in the face-to-face, both neighbours and strangers are close to hand. The other's moral presence (or absence) is over-determined (or under-mined) by her physical presence. She is part of my neighbourhood, even if I treat her as a stranger. In mediated space, both neighbours and strangers are far from reach. The other's moral absence (or presence) is over-determined (or under-mined) by her physical absence. She is somewhere else, even if I treat her as a neighbour. Yet for us to be moral beings we have to be able to take responsibility for the other in both situations.

The problem that mediated space creates for us as moral beings is that of the creation and defence of proper distance – that of making contact, ensuring proximity, and of establishing the moral duty of disinterested care. The mediated face is, in one sense, the metaphysical face as Levinas defines it. The Internet is, in some quite literal sense, metaphysical. Yet it is because the mediated face is not visible, even if we can see it, and that it is both escapable and exploitable, that the implications of Levinas' critique become, in this context, both peculiarly relevant and urgent. The mediated face makes no demands on us, because we have the power to switch it off, and to withdraw. But for us as moral beings this is something we can not do. We can not switch it off. "Responsibility is silenced once proximity is eroded; it may eventually be replaced with resentment once the fellow human subject is transformed into an [o]ther" (Bauman, 1989, 184).

For Levinas (and for Bauman who follows him closely in this) our capacity to be, and to act as, moral beings comes from a recognition that this capacity is in some quite fundamental way granted by the other, by her presence in our cognitive and aesthetic space. It precedes us. It humbles us. It forces us to acknowledge our limits and our own vulnerabilities. We can not, therefore, put ourselves first or, indeed, last. "My responsibility", says Bauman (1989, 182) "is unconditional". It is the primary component of subjectivity. Distance threatens responsibility. So too does our belief in our omnipotence, our technologically enhanced omnipotence.

The mediated face comes to us both in broadcast and conversational modes (cf. Peters, 1999). Each provides different opportunities and challenges for the moral self. It might be thought that the broadly conversational character of communication on the Internet would be more conducive than that of television or radio in the creation of a moral life, especially given Levinas's own stress on the conversational mode; and this indeed is what many of its defenders argue. But there are dangers and misconceptions in both forms of technologically mediated discourse, and it is to this that I now want to turn.

5. Technology

There are, then, those who believe that the Internet offers a way of communicating that transcends the limitations that broadcast media impose by the absence in them of what might be called genuine interactivity.   The distance that broadcast media place between sender, receiver and object, a distance which creates a *prime facie* condition of moral distance (c.f. Tester, 1997) is overcome, it is suggested, once connection becomes inter-connection, and once communication, real communication, becomes possible between individuals and groups both in real time and in communicative spaces of their own choosing or creating.

In the terms in which I am now trying to set the debate it can be seen that broadcasting masks the face of the other by pretending to a proximity that is in fact false. The Internet, on the other hand, claims to reveals the face of the other by transcending distance and generating proximity which is, in effect, true. This latter claim, by implication a claim for the Internet to be able to reproduce natural communication, or the authority and authenticity of face-to-face communication, both implicitly and explicitly, leads to a claim for moral superiority. Is that claim warranted or not?

There is one more step we need to take before addressing this question directly. It is the question concerning technology. Can technologies be moral?

Bruno Latour (1992) seems to think they can. Technologies can act, and do act, as humans do. We delegate responsibility to them, and they in their turn impose their morality on us, as users and as mediating objects:

> In spite of the constant weeping of moralists, no human is as relentlessly moral as a machine … We have been able to delegate to nonhumans not only force as we have known it for centuries but also values, duties, and ethics. It is because of this morality that we, humans, behave so ethically, no matter

how weak and wicked we feel we are (Latour, 1992, 232, quoted in Feenberg, 1999, 102).

From the point of view of the arguments being offered here, this is a profound mistake. The delegation of moral responsibility is a contradiction in terms. Whereas we can properly enquire into the embodied social values in technologies, and whereas we can see, for example in Latour's deliberately trivial example of the door closer (a device that takes on the responsibility for automatically closing a door once we have passed through it) how such values and norms allow us to recognise a certain symmetry in our relationships to technology, it is precisely the absence of such symmetry that defines the core of the moral. The presumption that technologies can be moral, or that we can delegate our own ethical sense to technology, misreads the particular centrality of responsibility as a precondition for a moral life. Technologies don't care. Technologies can't care. Technologies can't be made to care.

Indeed the argument can be taken one step further. It is precisely in this delegation that some of the most profound acts of man's inhumanity to man have been released (Bauman, 1989). Technologies, and the technologising of the social, have in recent times, and still, both created and masked the, improper, distance which has allowed responsibility for the other to be denied, and for care for the other to be dissolved.

More specifically the morality that media and communications technologies enable is easily, and often, presumed to be a function of their capacity to connect. That is what they do. They bring us together. And that connection is sufficient, it is said, for us to relate to each other as human, moral, beings. It is transcendent. It is all we need. It offers us unimaginable possibilities for controlling our lives. And, arguably too, possibilities for our own personal fulfilment. But I am arguing that we need to go beyond connection, if we are to pursue a grounded ethics. The motivated irony in Levinas's position, and also in my own, is that it is precisely in the failure completely to connect, *and in the acknowledgement of the inevitability of that failure*, that technologically

mediated communication might enable us ethically. This too is a question of determining proper distance.

6. Cyberspace

I hesitate. Perhaps there is no such thing. What exists, of course, and multiply, are claims for its existence: its separateness, its transcendence, its difference, its liberatory potential. The claims are familiar, utopian, and easily challenged. The on-line world is very alike, and still depends upon, the off-line one and we can observe its enclosure by the forces of capital and the world wide web (Silverstone, 2001). Yet in these electronic networks, networks that are to all practical purposes infinite in their extent and their extension, there is a reality to be confronted: a new kind of communicative space that offers itself both to colonisation and critique.

In this, the final section of my essay, I want to address some of the claims that are made for cyberspace, and to examine those claims – for community and identity,(the terms which we use, and which are required, in our everyday concern with our relationship to the other) – against the measure of morality that I have derived from my discussion of Levinas. Once again, to restate, my aim is not to propose a specific code of ethics for cyberspace, but to provide a basis, at best, for doing so. It is also to propose a critical position from which to examine the failures of others to consider, or to read, the moral implications of their own arguments.

There is a paradox in many of the analyses of on-line behaviour. It emerges from the observation that, on the one hand, identities are fluid and can easily be disguised, but that such fluidity nevertheless results in things called communities, rarely defined but taken to mean more or less stable structures of sociability and conviviality. Identity and community are mutually intertwined in cyberspace as well as elsewhere. Identities come to be shaped through social interaction and participation. They are the product (and also the precondition) of our capacity to be in the world as active, one might say moral,

agents. Yet in cyber-space that crucial and interdependent relationship is both
uncoupled and elided.

As Allucquere Rosanne Stone has famously noted in describing cyberspace
as an "unexpected kind of "field""; it contains "incontrovertibly social spaces
in which people still meet face-to-face, but under new definitions of both
"meet" and "face". These new spaces instantiate the collapse of the
boundaries between the social and technological, biology and machine,
natural and artificial that are part of the postmodern imaginary" (Stone, 1994,
85). Tracing the origins of virtual communities in the idea of shareware she
defines the bid for sociality both in an expectation of reciprocity (88) and a
desire for survival (111).   Virtual communities offer:

> … the sense of unlimited power which the dis/embodied
> simulation produces, and the different ways in which
> socialisation has led those always-embodied participants
> confronted with the sign of unlimited power to respond (107).

The irony here lies in the refusal of identity as a singular category but at the
same time insisting on the self as the focus of action and desire: the defining
characteristics of our involvement in cyberspace are, for her, reciprocity,
survival and potency. And all at a distance. No sense of the other.

More sophisticated analyses of on-line activity point to their relationship to,
and continuing interdependence with, off-line activity, but still insist on the
viability of, and value in, the on-line. Nancy Baym (1995) points to a number
of components of social action – new forms of expressive communication, the
exploration of possible public identities, the creation of otherwise unlikely
relationships, and the development of behavioural norms – both to signal the
specificity of on-line sociality but also to relate it directly to forms of action and
behaviour in off-line everyday life.   This analysis recognises the possibilities of
group formation in cyber-space, and the role of significant individuals as key
cyber-figures in holding such spaces together, but it does not recognise how
so-called on-line communities can create and sustain responsibility. While it
may be the case that "Social realities are created through interaction as
participants draw on language and the resources available to make messages

that serve their purpose" (Baym, 1995, 161) those social realities are defined according to a functional and solipsistic rationality that believes in the self before, and independent of, the other.   And it is forced to recognise that on-line sociality is, necessarily and essentially, voluntaristic, and, arguably, ephemeral. The other poses no challenge.   She can be avoided.

Barry Wellman and Milena Gulia (1999) take this position a step further. They argue that communities no longer exist as they once did (or were believed to have existed) and that modernity has already enabled communities that are neither as intense, nor as persistent, as those of old. Technologies and the dispersal and mobility of populations have changed and undermined the singularity of community and weakened it. On-line communities are, consequently, as varied as off-line ones, involving thin but also thick networks of relationships and providing the same kinds of network support that exist off-line:

> There is so little community life in most neighbourhoods in western cities that it is more useful to think of each person as having a personal community: an individual's social network of informal interpersonal ties, ranging from a half-dozen intimates to hundreds of weaker ties. Just as the Net supports neighbourhood-like group communities of densely knit ties, it also supports personal communities, wherever in social or geographical space these ties are located and however sparsely knit they may be (Wellman and Gulia, 1999, 187).

One of the tests of the viability of such community networks (is the notion of a community network a tautology or an oxymoron?), Wellman and Gulia suggest, lies in the degree of intimacy that can be generated on-line.   At the same time they argue that computer mediated communication offers people an enhanced ability to move between relationships. This is the problem of proper distance restated.   But it is not addressed. Indeed the idea of the personal community is possibly, perhaps, the ultimate step: an appropriately postmodern narcissistic move in which community becomes conceptually and empirically, and without irony or reflexivity, both a projection and an extension of the self.

7. Conclusion

There are two distinct ironies of my own underlying this discussion. But they illuminate, albeit if only to a limited degree, the particular route I have followed in this essay. The first irony revolves around the notion of the metaphysical. The Internet offers, at least in its apologists' eyes, a particular intensification of the kind of mediated communication with which we have become familiar in broadcast and telephone technologies, and that intensification – I have called it transcendent – is by definition and in practice, metaphysical. It moves beyond, and no longer depends upon, the constraints of bodily communication, and the limiting contiguities of the face-to-face. In the metaphysical spaces thus released, distance is no barrier to contact. The physical boundaries that separate the "social and technological, biology and machine, natural and artificial" (Stone, 1994, 85) are transgressed, if not entirely dissolved. They are seen, at least, as no longer relevant.

The metaphysical character of the Internet licenses, I submit, its metaphysical interrogation. It is precisely through the claims and hopes for the Internet as a liberatory force for human culture, that its status as a moral entity both emerges, and must be questioned. These claims involve a number of moves, not least the belief that technologies can themselves be moral, and that they enable, even if they do not exactly determine, our capacity to act ethically. But, as I have argued, moral responsibility can not be delegated to the media machine, however sophisticated and human that media machine presents itself as being.

The second dimension of irony – more implicit than explicit thus far - involves not the metaphysical but the anthropological. Concern with the other has long been a preoccupation of those involved with the sociologically and culturally distant. Bringing anthropology back home, investigating its own otherness without exoticising that otherness, has required some considerable soul-searching, both ethical and epistemological. Marc Augé's (1995,1998) reflections on the characterisation of the other neatly parallel, without in any way replicating or endorsing, some of the arguments that I have been attempting to pursue in this paper. His *Sense for the Other* (1998) requires a

double questioning: both of the meanings we make of the other, and of the meaning of her presence amongst us, which he notes is being lost and at the same time becoming more acute in contemporary society; and of that other's own endless capacity to make meanings of her own. Anthropology is in these terms then always an anthropology of the other's anthropology (1998, xv-xvi).

But this anthropology is crucially both constructed in, and from within, space. It is spatial. It is grounded: for meanings, if they are to have significance, must be located, and are so located. There is a necessary, if often nostalgic, interrelation between place, community, longing, belonging and identity, an interrelationship which does not require singularity, nor does it presume consistency of position, but which we can only think about, in some sense, as if they were conjoined. Augé is keen to identify the increasing salience of what he calls non-places in contemporary society, to indicate both where and how the sense of self and the necessarily correlative sense of otherness becomes vulnerable, becomes dislocated, and where and how social ties that are "normally" inscribed in place are lost (1998, 108). Here too the Internet comes into question, as the virtual, arguably, struggles with, or dissembles, a sense of place. We need consequently to be wary of the Internet's claims for place, for its "placefulness".

If Levinas requires a focus on our new media spaces which has its origins in metaphysics, Augé's predisposition, as is anthropology's more generally, is to epistemology. His injunction to confront the other is a methodological one. Yet both are ethical. Both philosophy and anthropology require the creation of proper distance, which for the one, in this case, is principally a moral and for the other is a cognitive project. As Augé points out, "We ask of ethnology that it enable us to understand the other's culture, other cultures, both from within and without, that it be simultaneously participatory and distanced" (1998, 54).

The Internet's liberatory, if not libertarian, claims can then still be seen to involve the preservation of the centrality of identity and community as the dominant couplet for the analysis of life on-line. However neither, I believe, is any longer sufficient for the task, since both are losing, in their various post-

modern reformulations, any capacity for critical interrogation. Identity is becoming fractured, community dissolved, and only shells and illusions remain. What seems to be replacing them analytically are, inevitably solipsistic and narcissistic, notions of performance and technologically enabled omnipotence (Abercrombie and Longhurst, 1998). I suggest that this couplet should be complemented, if not replaced, by a different couplet, a couplet of quite a different kind: that of infinity and humility. For this couplet signals the requirement, always, to pause, and to consider the limits, both technological and human, of our attempts to know and to control the world.

The first step in any move towards an ethics for the Internet, or for cyberspace, requires us to recognise and understand those limits, and to see that they are not technology's but our own. The ambiguities that we confront in our dealings with each other – as neighbours and strangers – are irresolvable, and ambivalence is their necessary consequence. In so far as our media technologies promise a resolution of these ambiguities, and lead us to believe that they have the capacity so to do, they must be challenged. The Internet is no exception. An ethics for cyberspace must also be able to encompass distance as a crucial component of the moral life, and it must address the problem of how we can behave responsibly in our dealings with mediated others. This is the problem of proper distance as I have posed it. I hope that this essay provides a contribution, albeit, as I am fully aware, an entirely limited one, to that critical project.

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