

## Face-interface or the prospect of a virtual ethics

*Much of the research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) identifies various forms of disinhibition associated with the engagement with another through the medium of computerized communications technology. Yet disinhibition should not be taken to exclude the possibility of conceiving of a framework for an ethical engagement with the Other in CMC practice. Using the idea of the 'face' as it is developed in the work of Levinas, I believe it is possible to augment the idea of the seemingly boundless freedom opened out by new technologies with the notion of the responsible or ethical user. To do this, I will suggest that a phenomenology of the user interface is necessary as a first stage in enabling CMC studies to work through the conceptual distinction on which these studies apparently hinge, that is, a distinction between CMC and face-to-face (FTF) communication. At the core of this phenomenology, I will examine a conceptual apparatus constructed around the notion of a 'face-interface', understood as a dual facet of the engagement with an Other both of and through the figure of the computer, experienced as an extension of the body and the voice of both user and interlocutor.*

Keywords: phenomenology, Levinas, computer-mediated communication (CMC), ethics, disinhibition, alterity, other, face, interface

My purpose here is to make some initial investigations into the possibility of using a Levinasian ethical framework – in particular, the slippery concept of 'face' – within an ethics of computer mediated communication (CMC). This paper will, by necessity, pull up short of developing such an approach more fully. It seeks instead to lay some groundwork from which such a framework might be later developed. This is to say that before we stumble toward pursuing applications of Levinas's ethics in the CMC environment, we need to be very clear about the potential for conceptual

slippages and contradictions, and to set up a conceptual model according to which such mishaps can be avoided.

My initial task will be to establish the most evident obstacles to the use of Levinas in studies of CMC, and I will then outline in rudimentary fashion the first steps that must be taken in order to overcome these obstacles. The need for just such an ethical approach may never have been more evident than now. In the last few years, in the United States, United Kingdom, and elsewhere, a number of lawsuits have been filed relating to abusive or offensive material in posts to Internet discussion forums or message boards. The onset of litigation is, I believe, an inevitable outcome of the relative lack of regulation exerted by legislators over the worldwide web. The speed with which the dominion of the Internet mutated from a small clique of fairly self-regulated hackers to something far more global, and more amorphous, has been dizzying, and it is little wonder that legislators who cut their teeth on simple issues like local content in broadcast media have been unable to keep up with its progress.

### Can freedom be commensurate with responsibility?

The flipside of this is that proponents of Internet technology decry the prospect of regulatory control with suggestions that the web has evolved in its chaotic manner according to a libertarian ethos – or, at least, a mythos – of individual freedoms: free speech; free enterprise; free access; free sampling; in short, free agency. Yet can such freedoms be also commensurate with the idea of a responsible subject? The history of the Internet is dotted with flashpoints at which the freedoms enjoyed by many users at one time and on one site translates into a free-for-all. The onset of litigation arises as a result of this situation in which many pockets of the web want conspicuously to inure themselves against seemingly anti-social communicative practices such as spamming, flaming, or trolling.

Yet it may be the case that anti-social communicative practices are par for the course on the Internet, since social researchers of CMC suggest that on-line interlocutors invariably seem sufficiently protected by the anonymity of the web to indulge in 'disinhibition', in which the interlocutor loses any sense of the interaction as being imbued with a social status, thus leading to a diminished sense of responsibility toward other participants. These researchers also show that disinhibition tends

to function normatively in on-line communication: the language of CMC is by and large stripped bare of phatic markers, creating a greater degree of self-orientation in the communicative act, whether this takes the form of excessive self-disclosure or anonymous flaming.

The principle of disinhibition might, of course, seem to be a significant obstacle for an ethical framework. Disinhibition appears to be, from the standpoint of the individual user, linked to increasing freedom, yet we have seen that it also leads to diminished responsibility. Yet for Levinas, freedom is born of responsibility; indeed, it hinges inexorably upon the establishment of a responsibility toward the Other. As Zygmunt Bauman explains in an eloquent paraphrasing of Levinas from *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (1993: 86): 'I am I who is responsible, he is he to whom I assign the right to make me responsible. It is in this first creation of meaning of the Other, and thus also of myself, that my freedom, my *ethical* freedom, comes to be.' In other words, I am responsible first, and from this responsibility comes my freedom.

Thus, we seem to be already at something of an impasse: disinhibition presents itself as a normative function of Internet practice, yet this normative function fundamentally reverses the ethical relation we seek to instantiate. How can the two be reconciled? More to the point, initially, is a Levinasian approach to CMC a viable goal? Levinas may in fact strike us a most unlikely candidate for the originator of an ethics of CMC. The man's own lack of ease with electronic modes of communication is well documented. In his oration at Levinas's funeral, Jacques Derrida recalled the anxiety Levinas expressed at the fear of being cut off in the middle of the communicative act:

I cannot speak of the interruption without recalling, like many among you no doubt, the anxiety of interruption that I could feel in Emmanuel Levinas when, on the telephone for example, he seemed at each moment to fear being cut off, to fear the silence or disappearance, the 'without-response,' of the other whom he tried to call out to and hold on to with an 'allo, allo' between each sentence, and sometimes even in mid-sentence (1996: 7).

We can only imagine how anxious Levinas might have been if faced with an on-line communication environment such as the

Messenger system: the lack of voice, delays while the interlocutor types a reply, and worst of all, the fear that at any moment the status of the interlocutor may change to offline. Levinas's anxiety suggests that in his own personal constitution there lay a deep dependence on the visible presence of the other person, a reliance on non-verbal cues, eye contact, and such like. We may even find it tempting to investigate the possibility that the emphasis on such key concepts as 'face' and 'proximity' – which Bauman is in fact explaining in the quotation that I have used earlier – are so important in Levinas's theoretical model because of a deep-seated fear of a lack of intimacy within the theorist's own psychological make-up.

Yet I will leave that discussion aside for now. Here, it will suffice for us to note that such an observation – that Levinas seems to have possessed a psychological aversion to any electronic mode of communication – not only does not preclude our attempt to apply Levinasian theory to CMC; it demands that we press ahead with this attempted linkage. Our goal, in other words, will be to divest a theoretical model from what may have been a limitation imposed upon it solely on the grounds of the personal anxieties of the individual who developed the model.

### Face and proximity

The task will not be simple. Already, the key terms that we have indicated we will be using to focus our discussion of Levinas – face and proximity – will strike some readers as representing a significant obstacle for a Levinasian approach to CMC. Readers may be familiar with these terms for the very reason that they have been traditionally used in CMC studies to define the mode of communication from which CMC is itself to be differentiated. By definition, CMC studies have long required that their object is defined in binary opposition to face-to-face (FTF) communication. All that CMC studies presume to be fully present in FTF communication – the simultaneous presence of the interlocutors in close proximity, with exposed and visible faces – is understood to be absent from CMC.

Fortunately, this binary opposition provides us with the terms we require to proceed, since even the most cursory encounter with Levinas's writings on the concept of face is radically at odds with the compact definition of FTF communication as traditionally proffered within communications research. Thus, we can

begin by demonstrating that the concept of face, for Levinas, resists the binary separation of the terms CMC and FTF upon which CMC studies is grounded. As we do this, of course, we must also be duly cautious not to suggest that this resistance is absolute, such that the Levinasian concept of face might be rendered completely irrelevant to the frames of reference according to which CMC studies operate. Thus, it is necessary to leave sufficient room in our demonstration for recuperation of the traditional ground of CMC studies. To do this, we shall carefully map several of the different ways in which Levinas himself grappled with the slipperiness of this concept of 'face', even as we work to establish a consistent framework that can be extrapolated out from writings that span more than four decades.

There are occasions in Levinas's work on which the term 'face' is described in terms that might seem to be consistent with the compact definition of the FTF encounter. It may even be said that Levinas seeks never to have 'face' wholly divorced from the direct presentation (the *presence*) of the person, appearing before me as 'this chaste bit of skin, with brow, eyes, nose, and mouth' (1987: 41). Yet neither can 'face' ever be wholly reduced to this surface presentation. The face initially emerges in Levinas's work as a way to explain what is lost in Heidegger's ontology. In order to explain that we do not simply encounter others in the essence of their being, that is, in the moment of Being-with-the-Other, Levinas asserts that this encounter cannot translate as simply letting the other be: 'Is not the independence of the other (*autrui*) accomplished in the role of being summoned? Is the one to whom one speaks understood from the first in his being? Not at all. The other (*autrui*) is not an object of comprehension first and an interlocutor second. The two relations are intertwined' (1996: 6). The relations that Levinas describes in this way amounts to the idea that it is possible for me to gain access in some tangible way to another human being, and this idea of access is what he calls 'a face' (ibid: 8) in this early essay on ontology.

Later, as he began working through these ideas in greater detail, descriptions of the face become more complex. In *Totality and Infinity*, the face is first and foremost a speaking face but it is no mere interlocutor. Its defining feature is now 'expression,' which is a primary condition for locution *per se*: 'The face, expression simpliciter, forms the first word, the face is the signifier which appears on top of this sign,

like eyes looking at you' (1969: 153). The shift effected here will be crucial in what follows. Locution or speech is not the *modus operandi* of the face, but only a function of its entry into language. To describe this function, Levinas introduces a careful distinction between the Saying and the Said. What Levinas calls the Saying is a precondition for the Said (or the content of speech understood as having already been articulated) but the Saying is commensurable more with this concept of expression, which is to be understood not as a language contained in or passing out of the mouth; rather, it is the irreducible 'language of the eyes' (ibid: 66). The shift from mouth to eyes opens the way for a possible further movement, and Levinas is forced to admit that expression can be understood within the ethical relation 'in the sense that implements, clothing, and gestures express' (ibid: 182). Later still, in *Otherwise than Being* and elsewhere, the field to which 'face' refers will expand further, at once referring back to the skin as a way to reinforce the non-verbal component of the face's expression, and yet refusing to give over to an ontological standpoint by insisting to an even greater extent on the enigmatic non-phenomenal status of the face. The face recedes from presence in these later works in order to emphasize *proximity*, that is, the space between the Other and the Same, although in so doing, the face comes to represent ever more insistently the face of a human interlocutor.

#### The fundamental 'alterity' of the Other

The point is that Levinas never settled on a programmatic definition of the term 'face' in his work; rather, he continually grappled with the issue of putting a face – so to say – to the ethical relation. Importantly, however, from early in his thinking Levinas was to hold firm on a crucial aspect of this relation: the fundamental 'alterity' of the Other. In *Totality and Infinity*, for example, Levinas had already determined that Heidegger's ontology fails ultimately because it elides the 'otherness' of the Other, which Levinas calls the Other's alterity. This is to say that the encounter with the Other is not simply about difference and sameness, but about the fact that the relation must by definition involve both an 'I' and one other.

In this sense, the otherness of the Other is always an otherness within a relation between two. This fundamental principle, once established, becomes the conceptual grounding on which Levinas builds the whole of his ethical framework. Alterity is nothing more nor less

than what conjoins me to the Other as a responsible being, since it is the presence of the Other as another and the necessary recognition that I am therefore one in a relation with one other that allows me to come into knowledge of myself. Thus, I am wholly responsible to the Other for my being. It is in this elegant formulation that Levinas found the key to the ethical relation, and to the absolute priority of the Other before the Same, the latter of which pairing comes into being only as a consequence of the alterity of the Other.

Where Levinas seems to equivocate, it is in trying to present this elegant formulation on some occasions in ways that can be applied to everyday realities and at other times in the fullness of the implications of this model for metaphysics. As I have suggested with my brief discussion of the various ways in which the concept of 'face' was used throughout Levinas's works, this term was highly subject to such equivocations. Yet it is clear that in all of these various modalities by which the 'face' is presented, Levinas insists that 'face' must ultimately be seen as being that by which I come to be aware of the alterity of the Other, and therefore that through which I am enjoined to respond to the Other. We have seen that in his early work, this issue of responding to the Other was linked to interlocution, which is why it must have seemed necessary in that work to conceive of this Other as human, since it is with humans that we communicate as such. Yet we also saw that as early as *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas was prepared to concede that, in the application of these concepts to everyday realities, the face could potentially be anything that conveys an *expression*. It is on this crucial point that our discussion will now hinge.

Admittedly, in what I cited above, Levinas maintains that the face expressing itself is a human face, yet the fact that this expression is defined 'in the sense that implements, clothing, and gestures express' means that he is willing to conceive of this face in far more general terms, as something exterior; shall we say, as anything associated with the surface of the body. Face can thus be of the human but need not be human itself, as long as it expresses itself and enjoins one to respond. The preposition is key here: as Bernhard Waldenfels points out, the postscript to *Totality and Infinity* – 'Beyond the Face' – should be read as informing rather than creating a movement away from the work that precedes it. Accordingly, we would be more inclined to take seriously the observation that the 'whole body' consti-

tutes the face, 'in order to develop a sort of responsiveness which penetrates all our senses and our bodily behaviour *in toto*'. In other words, we should read in Levinas at this moment the claim that face is *of us* totally, in the sense of an embodied wholeness rather than just of our uppermost visage.

As Levinas withdraws from this position in subsequent works, he intends to develop an ethical framework that goes beyond the phenomenal. Yet his willingness to take the phenomenological investigation as a starting point must not be overlooked. What I believe is lacking in the vast majority of work on CMC is just this phenomenological basis. Studies of CMC invariably proceed from the standard communications model of sender-message-receiver with the technology used to convey the message given – as the name suggests – the role of medium. Both sender and receiver are deemed to be present only in so far as both have access to a computer terminal, but as a result they are both deemed to be absent from each other. It is thus because neither interlocutor is present to the other that CMC is invariably described in terms of being a disembodied or 'virtual' form of communication. A phenomenological investigation would begin, I suggest, not by considering the failure of the interlocutors to appear before each other but by emphasising the minimal physical condition on which CMC is grounded: each participant requires access to a computer terminal.

#### Grounding virtual ethics in the phenomenal

A virtual ethics must ground itself in the phenomenal, beginning with a consideration of the engagement between human and computer, rather than treating the computer as an incidental component in the recession of the human interlocutors from one another. I have been working on a phenomenology of computer use for several years and while a detailed account of this project would represent an overlong digression here, I shall affirm that the body is far from absent from the frames of reference. The hand guides the mouse, caresses the touchpad, thumps the keyboard, but the engagement extends beyond digits and thumbs to cover the whole of my body in that I am situated vis-à-vis a chair, a bench, my lap, and most importantly, a screen. All of these technologies to which I make my body fit have evolved through various, not always altogether interconnected, pathways.

When I fit myself to the spaces laid out by the

shape of the computer workspace I give myself bodily to this current intersection of these various technologies and their histories of design. Once, while incapacitated, I tried to make the workspace fit my bodily requirements. It was not easy, working on a keyboard while prone on a bed, even less so trying to use a mouse without a solid, flat surface. The technology is of course adaptable, to a degree. Witness the very elaborate design modifications that have been developed to enable Stephen Hawking to defy his condition by continuing to use his computer. Yet in recent times, as his condition has continued to deteriorate, even Hawking has been forced to acquiesce to the standard design requirements of this technology by employing an assistant to type for him. In short, the design specifications of the computer interpellate the user normatively and deviations from the normative body are accommodated only to a limited extent.

Now, I noted that a virtual ethics should be grounded in such phenomenal matters. It is important that we also push further and do not content ourselves with mapping all the limitations that workspaces place on our bodies, like some grand workplace health and safety regimen. Cyborg studies have in the past decade produced some interesting commentaries on the plight of the body in an increasingly electronic or machinic age, yet the ethical imperatives coming out of these studies are typically expressed as the concern for what happens to human bodies in the encounter between the human and the machine, or in the transition from the real to the virtual space. These studies are concerned, that is, for the *status* of the human and the machine, in the extent to which either can be said to contain the other as a state. While frequently bemoaning the loss of the human being in the transition to the cyborg state, these studies already consign both human and machine to objects. We need to consider, as Levinas does, the entry into language of the human through the encounter with the machine, the coming forth of the speaking subject rather than the settling down of things into objective states.

#### How the computer presents itself to us

To do this, we shall extend the phenomenological map of the human body fitted to the design specifications of the computer workspace by considering the way in which the computer *presents* itself to us. Even as we learn to use the mouse, the keyboard, or all other associated pieces of hardware, computers are already interpellating us in another way,

through the *interface*, by which I refer to the words and images on the computer screen as they interact with the technologies by which we can access them, and which systematically enjoin us to engage with a computer program in specific ways. In the earliest days of computer design, the programs that ran on computers were capable of being activated only by programmers, specialists who write programs and understand programming languages. In order for computers to be rendered useful for laypersons, programmers developed the user-interface, which interpellates us as users rather than as programmers. The interface is what appears to us on the screen, addressing us in a language that we understand so that we do not need to familiarize ourselves with the parameters of the programming language in order for the program to work for us.

While the computer workspace situates the human body within given parameters, it is the interface that draws forth from that body the entry into language. The interface is, quite simply, the movement beyond the surface of the body – what Freudians call the skin ego – towards an expression. It is, to be sure, the condition for the possibility of interlocution in CMC, which should suggest to us that the interface is therefore aptly named, even in a Levinasian sense, as the anterior of the face which expresses itself. The interface does not wholly preclude the appearance of the face, at least at the level of image. Communications researchers have established that the use of a photographic image of the interlocutor as an on-screen avatar does not simply reproduce a face-to-face relation in the immediacy of what we would consider a full presence: ‘At least some of the time, trying to make interfaces more like humans apparently results in disconcerting users, if not actually confusing or displeasing them’ (cited in Walther et al 2001: 106). The point is, of course, that the image or representation does not substitute for a full presence, and this is a point that Levinas makes even about the perception of the face of the Other as a sign. To put it bluntly, the interface functions better in enjoining us to enter into language, to express ourselves, and to respond if it remains unadorned with a hollow mask. This is its enigmatic crux: the interface must not present itself as a representation of a face.

Jeffrey Hancock and Philip Dunham (2001) have shown that people engaged in FTF interactions tended to have more detailed impressions about their interlocutor, but the partici-

pants in CMC tended to make more intense and enduring impressions. The face of the other, it seems, when it appears before us in the space we normally reserve only for the inter-face, might actually militate against the kind of affinity that we would expect as a precondition for the ethical relation. I suggest that the increase in intensity of impression-formation in the CMC environment is associated with the concept of disinhibition, which I discussed at the start of this paper. I suggest in turn that what the social researchers call disinhibition is a residue of the bodily connection we have with the technology that facilitates this mode of communication. As we give ourselves over to the machine, the line between our exterior surface and the computer becomes blurred, and this relation is exacerbated by the interpellation of the user through the interface. We *disinhibit*, so to speak, because we wholly *inhabit* the site of computer use, hardware and text, and this point alone must lead us to consider the usefulness of a Levinasian framework in examining the ethical relation of communication between two computer users.

We arrive at a point, then, from which we might begin to outline the lineaments of an ethical framework for CMC studies, modelled on the work of Levinas. We have seen that of the likely obstacles to such a framework, the most insistent would seem to be the conventional distinction between CMC and FTF communication, since Levinasian theory situates the ethical relation wholly within the face to face encounter. Yet I have argued that the interface through which the computer user engages in CMC might be a locus for the thought of the 'face' in a Levinasian sense within CMC environments. In developing an ethical framework for CMC, then, I am suggesting that the conceptual status given by Levinas to 'face' should be attributed to the interface. This suggestion does require one further observation to be made here, namely, a comment regarding the capacity for something like a thought of a face-interface relation to accommodate the anteriority of the Other in a formation characterized principally by alterity. There is a possibility in what we have been describing to suggest that the phenomenology of computer use indicates a *direct* relation between user and computer, such that there is a coming together of human and technology. In this scenario, we fail to describe one being in a relation with one other, which is required in the ethical relation as Levinas describes it; rather, we merely bear witness to the emergence of the cyborg. Yet what I hope to have

shown in this paper is that the interface is no mere extension of a body fitted to a work-space. The interface calls the subject forth in the entry into language, and in this regard the interface generates a necessarily proximal relation, a projection of an exterior beyond the immediate contact between the body and its technological accoutrements.

In a paper in *The International Journal of Critical Psychology* (2002), several years ago, I examined the idea of embodiment as the very projection of a sense of an interior and an exterior of the self understood as a whole body, and it is this kind of thinking that underlines the present observations. Along these lines, the relation between the body and the technology of CMC is envisaged as the projection of a surface and an exterior, yet it is the bringing forth of myself as a speaking subject, which the interface enjoins me to be, that takes CMC into the realm of ethics. In bringing my self forth, beyond the surface projected as my exterior limit, the interface occasions the creation of the responsible 'I' and the other, which Levinas posits as the minimal precursors to the establishment of ethical freedom. If such an ethical framework is indeed possible in studies of CMC, then, what kind of shape would it take? As the previous comments suggest, a virtual ethics modelled on Levinas would be a strange hybrid – that is to say, it *should* be a strange hybrid: its origins must be located in the phenomenology of any CMC technology but it must also proceed further, taking in fields of knowledge that allow us to account for the intersubjective relation. This intersubjectivity is not, moreover, only to be reduced to the level of the communicative act between user and user, but must incorporate the role of the interface as interlocutor or, perhaps, as what Levinas himself described as 'expression *simpliciter*' in the very condition of making interlocution possible.

The necessary hybridity of such a study could, indeed, be precisely its most valuable asset in opening out the field of CMC studies to a range of contiguous disciplinary fields that are already producing interesting material under the rubric of Cyber Studies in more general terms. The studies currently being undertaken by communications researchers, for example, provide a wealth of useful primary data, but as I indicated already, the step toward an ethically inflected study of CMC requires the movement from phenomenology to an account of intersubjectivity. The common denominator in any study that proceeds along these lines will,

therefore, be a phenomenology of the technology in question. It is not sufficient to simply talk of the 'computer' in CMC as a constant, since the only constant is that technologies associated with computing are continually in transformation. Thus, it is essential that any study of CMC will account for the technology on offer at that moment. Phenomenologists may talk of essences in ways that strike a layperson as being a quality of an object outside of history, but as the object changes, then so too does the locus of the phenomenological investigation. To put this more simply, it does indeed matter whether I am working a mouse and a keyboard or using voice recognition software, or whether I am communicating via a text based messenger system or a fully developed synthetic world like *Second Life*. A phenomenology will drill down to this level of detail if it is to have any purchase on the specific CMC environment to which it refers.

### An ethical framework for CMC studies

The scope and method of an ethical framework for CMC studies will then be open to more expansive concerns, and I would be chary here to attempt to be too prescriptive about the precise forms that such studies might take. My own thinking about these matters has been informed by disciplines such as anthropology (Abbinett; Trend) and psychology (Joinson; Kuntze et al; Preston; Wallace), but there are doubtless others that can usefully be engaged in the task of unpacking intersubjectivity within a CMC environment. By retaining the phenomenological investigation as a precursor to these other fields of inquiry, we avoid the risk of presuming that the intersubjective relation inheres only in the figures of two humans.

By enabling the interface to be imagined as possessing the hallmarks of a subject-position – just as I have been arguing the user is invariably led to do in the process of entering into CMC as a communicative rather than simply a computing act – then we enrich the potential for the human sciences to give an account of what happens to the individual when he or she faces a computer in order to communicate. The value of such an exercise, on an ongoing basis, will be that it reinforces the responsibility that a user should assume as an integral part of any act that involves at least one other. This is to say that a study of CMC that proceeds from phenomenological inquiry to a further investigation of the impact of the phenomena on the interlocutor will, by definition, contain the rudiments of an ethical framework.

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