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Virtual Alterity and the Reformatting of Ethics

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□ *This article seeks to reconsider how traditional notions of ethics—ethics that privilege reason, truth, meaning, and a fixed conception of “the human”—are upended by digital technology, cybernetics, and virtual reality. We argue that prevailing ethical systems are incompatible with the way technology refigures the concepts and practices of identity, meaning, truth, and finally, communication. The article examines how both ethics and technology repurpose the liberal humanist subject even as they render such a subject untenable. Such an impasse reformats the question of ethics by introducing questions of radical alterity, making it possible for new ethical systems to emerge.*

Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality. (Levinas, 1961/1969, p. 21)

A recent *New Yorker* (2002, p. 68) cartoon drawn by Eric Lewis depicts the Earth seeking medical attention. The line-drawn earth, marked by the Americas down the side of its expressionless face, looks up at the examiner, a benevolent, smooth-faced planetary physician bearing a Saturn-like ring *cum* illumination device. The physician-planet's grim diagnosis of the Earth patient is revealed in the caption: “I’m afraid you have humans.” Beneath the cartoon's environmental argument about humans' destruction of the earth's resources lies the more general, somewhat surprising notion of the human as parasitic, disease-like. Indeed, the earth is crawling with the things—they are inhabiting, spreading, mutating, colonizing ... like viruses. The cartoon effectively turns typically human-centric viral fears on their head by suggesting that perhaps humans themselves are the problem, at least as far as the earth is concerned. The earth, after all, did not ask to be our benevolent host, much like humans do not actively seek out smallpox or other death- or illness-bearing viral agents. Cartoonist Lewis, of course, is not the first to notice a human virus. That distinction might go

to Friedrich Nietzsche (1901/1983a), whose maniacal laughter in response to human grandiosity haunts us still today. Or perhaps it was “god”? Origins notwithstanding, many writers have tracked down or happened upon various strains of the human virus. William Burroughs (1998), obsessed with viral movements, proposed that language and communication technologies operate on a logic of contagion, and as such, are potential “carriers” of the human. As Richard Doyle (1997) tracked the conceptual mutation of “life,” he found that even the postvital, informational structures of DNA and A-Life are teeming with rhetorical traces of human identity. N. Katherine Hayles (1999), too, located in cybernetics a strain of the old, outdated liberal humanist subject—the will to sameness, the privileging of mind, consciousness, and information, over matter, bodies, and material substrates.

What follows will track mutative movement of the human through practices and discourses of the virtual. In doing so, we will trace strains of the human in questions of ethics, bodies, identity, meaning, truth and lies, language, and communication. Our tracking of these strains is not necessarily motivated by a misanthropic antihumanism, but rather a cautionary, skeptical consideration of how the human encounters technology in the instance of cyberspace. In other words, problems with humans seem to arise when humans encounter their “others,” be they earthly or virtual. It is fair to say that this special issue itself is occasioned by a similar problematic to that presented by the *New Yorker* cartoon: To what extent does the virtual “have humans” in both senses of that phrase—that is, hold humanity in its grip or on its surface even as it is infected by human impulses to spread, to colonize, to mean? In other words, we are suggesting the question of the ethical implications of cyberspace might usefully turn back onto the question of the human. Specifically, how are humans inflecting and infecting virtual worlds? What kind of strain of the human virus does a cyber environment produce? Is it self destructive? Self proliferating? Productively mutating? We will start with the subject of ethics, a subject we fear might already be contaminated.

The Subject of Ethics

The human, despite well-intended assurances to the contrary, is not some natural, ontological category. Like all concepts, the human has a definite ideological history and has been informed and supported by specific philosophical, political, and socio-cultural presuppositions. Although the history, logic, and implications of this particular concept have been recounted in many places (Davies, 1997; Ferry & Renaut, 1988/1990; Hartshorne, 1969; Hayles, 1999), it is perhaps with Nietzsche’s (1892/1983b) Zarathustra—who anticipated and taught the over-

man—and in Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966/1973)—which traces the origins and ends of man—that the concept of the human has received its most detailed and sustained critiques. The human, like anything in the arsenal of concepts, is defined in opposition to others. It has been and continues to be a border war fought on two fronts, against two forms of the non- or in-human—the animal and the machine. The fronts, however, have not been static. The line that divides “us” from “them” and delimits the inside from the outside, keeps shifting, and the human, although putting up a good fight, has lost battle after battle to both its organic and inorganic other. Originally, that is, at the beginning of the tradition that is conveniently marked as “Western thought,” the border was demarcated through the unique faculty of reason. The Greeks had defined the human as *zoon logon*, which was subsequently (mis)translated into Latin as *animal rationale* by the Scholastics. Consequently, it has been “reason” that traditionally delineates where one draws the line between the human and the animal and the human and the machine. It is because the animal and machine share this negative characteristic, that they are, in the modern era, allied under one form of alterity. Beginning with the writings of René Descartes, the animal is increasingly described in mechanistic terms and associated with the machine. In the *Discourse on Method*, for example, Descartes (1637/1988) characterized animals as clockwork mechanisms. In 1738, this characterization was practically demonstrated when Jacques de Vaucanson exhibited a mechanical duck, which reportedly simulated all the elements of a duck. It ate, quacked, waddled, and even defecated (Mattelart, 1994/1996, pp. 22–23).

It is on the basis of reason, therefore, that the subject of ethics has been delimited and defined. Although already evident in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (1982), this formulation receives consummate articulation in the work of Immanuel Kant (1781/1965), who not only understood the human along Cartesian lines as a finite, thinking being, but situated the entire field of ethics under the practical employment of the cognitive faculty. In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant (1788/1985) argued that ethics is a matter of the free determination of the will and that reason alone is capable of making such a determination. For Kant (1788/1985), what is ethical is necessarily reasonable and what is reasonable is necessarily ethical. In this way, ethics is conjoined with what it means to be human. According to Kant (1788/1985), “the moral law reveals a life independent of animality” and “a destination which is not restricted to the conditions and limits of this life but reaches into the infinite” (p. 166). For Kant (1788/1985), it is the ethical that both distinguishes the human from its others and opens the possibility of infinity. Since Kant (1788/1985), this privileging of the rational, human subject has been the standard operating procedure (SOP) of ethics. It is, for example, at the center of Jürgen

Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981/1984), Martha Nussbaum's *Fragility of Goodness* (1986), and Charles Taylor's *Ethics of Authenticity* (1992).

*Reason ... perhaps [is] no longer
adequate to distinguish
the human from its others.*

The fortress of reason, however, has not provided adequate protection for the human, and the barbarians are not just at the gate, they have already broken through the defenses and have plundered the sanctum sanctorum. The fact is, reason and all its associated features—tool use, language, self-regulation, culture, etc.—are no longer, and perhaps never really were, adequate to distinguish the human from its others. As Donna Haraway (1991) described it,

By the late 20th century in the United States, scientific culture, the boundary between human and animal is thoroughly breached. The last beachheads of uniqueness have been polluted, if not turned into amusement parks—language, tool use, social behavior, mental events. Nothing really convincingly settles the separation of human and animal. (pp. 151–152)

She added

Late twentieth century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed, and many other distinctions that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert. (p. 152)

Once the boundaries of the human are breached in this fashion, the subject of ethics is up for grabs. How do you define ethics, when its unique, defining center, the human subject, is thoroughly infiltrated by its others—others that it has excluded and must exclude in order to be what it is? In other words, what becomes of the subject of ethics, when it is no longer subject to the human subject?

The Same Old Thing

All forms of ethics have privileged the same thing—the human. At the center of Western ethical theories there is the common assumption and unquestioned validation of the *anthropos*—the *anthropos* who bears a responsibility to other *anthropoi*. This anthropocentrism is not only apparent in those ethical writings

that Emmanuel Levinas (1961/1969) calls the “philosophy of the same,” (p. 38) the list of which reads like a who’s who of Western philosophy—Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and even Heidegger. However, it is also surprisingly apparent in Levinas’s (1988) own ethics of otherness. That is, Levinas’s radical alterity (1988) assumes an other that is remarkably consistent:

I cannot say at what moment you have the right to be called “face.” The human face is completely different and only afterwards do we discover the face of an animal. I don’t know if a snake has a Face . . . I do not know at what moment the human appears, but what I want to emphasize is that the human breaks with pure being, which is always a persistence in being . . . [W]ith the appearance of the human—and this is my entire philosophy—there is something more important than my life, and that is the life of the other. (p. 171–172)

In this way, Levinas’s philosophy, as Jeffrey Nealon (1996) demonstrated, is the same old thing. There is “an absolute privilege of the same that lives on in this discourse of the other” (p. 70), and this privilege revolves around the figure of the human. This “humanism” forecloses the possibilities of ethics, here and now and in the future. “We might,” Nealon (1998) wrote, “ask about those ethical calls of the future from beings that we cannot now even imagine, ethical calls that Donna Haraway categorizes under the heading of the ‘cyborg’ [which] appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed” (p. 71).

*Cyborg is a posthuman identity
formed from an erosion
of the boundaries.*

It is this persistent humanism situated in the tradition of ethics that makes it difficult to address other ethical questions—questions that concern other forms of otherness. Perhaps the best contemporary examples are efforts to articulate an environmental ethics and the ethical treatment of animals that does not reduce the “inhuman” other to the same through otherwise well-intended gestures of anthropomorphism. It is, however, under the name cyborg that the most pernicious and disturbing ethical challenges present themselves. The cyborg is a posthuman entity formed from an erosion of the boundaries that have characterized the human. What, then, of ethics in the era of the cyborg? What becomes of ethics in the face of another that is otherwise than an other?

Our questioning of the cyborg, although opening the way to other ethical possibilities, is still haunted by the tradition of humanism. In assuming

that the cyborg is an other that would be encountered in cyberspace, we protect ourselves and our assumed humanity. In this scenario, the cyborg is reduced to the Borg of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. It becomes an alien that threatens the borders of our precious anthropocentric federation as another proceeding from the outside. In this way, Levinas (1987) both understood and provided an accurate description of the experience of the Borg.

Experience, the idea of infinity, occurs in the relationship with the other This relationship consists in approaching an absolute exterior being. The infinity of this being, which one can therefore not contain, guarantees and constitutes this exteriority The exteriority of the infinite being is manifested in the absolute resistance which by its apparition, its epiphany, it opposes to all my powers. (pp. 54–55)

If the cyborg appeared in this fashion, it would be a matter of formulating a response to it; it would be a matter of our responsibility to this other, this “not us.” Unfortunately, this scenario, which works well in a television script, does not accurately characterize the situation. The cyborg is not some threat looming in the future, but a past accomplishment. We are, as Hari Kunzru (1997) described it in a *Wired* magazine article about Donna Haraway, already cyborg. Consequently, “cyborg” does not name an other that challenges our humanity and ethical responsibility. The cyborg already constitutes us, programming every possible response and the very concept of responsibility. The question for ethics is not the limits of my responsibility in the face of this other. The question is what becomes of ethics when its center—the human—is already assimilated into and decomposed by that which is not human? In short, there is a disjuncture between the profoundly humanist notion of ethics and that which N. Katherine Hayles (1999) called the posthuman, which, as the past tense of her book’s title suggests, we have already become. Still, we cannot help but point out how the posthuman, like any other post (postmodernism, poststructuralism), is not a simple rejection of the human, but something like an outgrowth.

My Life as a Dog

In a now well-known and often reproduced cartoon by Peter Steiner (1993, p. 61), two dogs sit in front of a PC. The one operating the machine says to his companion, “On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog.” The cartoon has often been employed to illustrate issues of identity and anonymity in computer-mediated, text-based communication (Holeton, 1998; Mitchell, 1995; Nunberg, 2002). As Holeton described it, “the cartoon makes fun of the anonymity of network communications

by showing a dog online, presumably fooling some credulous humans about its true identity" (p. 111). On this reading, what the cartoon portrays is that who or what one is in computer-mediated communication is, as Sandy Stone (1995), Sherry Turkle (1995), and others have demonstrated, something that can be easily and endlessly reconfigured. Consequently, online identity is as malleable and flexible as postmodernists have theorized.

This reading of the cartoon, although not necessarily incorrect, misses the more interesting and, for our purposes, suggestive insight provided by the wired canines. What the cartoon demonstrates is not the anonymity of the network but the unquestioned assumption that despite the anonymity of computer-mediated communication, users assume that the other with whom they interact online is another human. The other that confronts us in cyberspace is always, it is assumed, another human being, like ourselves. These others may be "other" in a "celebrate diversity" sense of the word—another race, another gender, another ethnicity, another social class, etc. However, they are never a dog. What the cartoon shows, through a kind of clever inversion, is the SOP of online interaction. Online identity is, in fact, reconfigurable. You can be a dog, or you can say you are. However, everyone knows, or so it is assumed, that what is on the other end is another human "user," someone who is, despite what are interpreted as minor variations in physical appearance, essentially like we assume ourselves to be. The cartoon works, because online everyone always already assumes you are human. "Inside the little box," Stone (1995) wrote, "are other people" (p. 16). Or, as Susan Herring (1996) described it, "computer-mediated communication (CMC) is communication that takes place between human beings via the instrumentality of computers" (p. 1). Online, what is on the line is the human.

Guided by Faces

On September 19, 1982, Scott Fahlman sketched the first two emoticons on an online bulletin board hosted by Carnegie Mellon University. Fahlman's original post, recovered from a backup tape and reproduced by Mike Jones (2002) on the Microsoft Smiley page, reads like this:

19-Sep-82 11:44 Scott E Fahlman :-)

From: Scott E Fahlman <Fahlman at CMU-20c>

I propose the following character sequence for joke markers:

:-)

Read it sideways. Actually, it is probably more economical to mark things that are NOT jokes, given current trends. For this, use :-)

While Fahlman (rather unfunnily) proposed the characters explicitly as joke markers, their name betrays their by now obvious and commonplace use—these are icons for emotions, reader tags for when, as one site puts it, “words absolutely fail you,” or as the *Hyperdictionary* entry on emoticons indicates, to supplement the “lack of verbal and visual cues” in “text-only communication forums” (Knight, 2002). What we seem to have in the emoticon, then, is a reemergence of the familiar will-to-presence that Derrida (1972/1982) located in the speech-writing conglomeration. However, it is the particular way presence is figured that interests us as we track the human in virtual worlds.

Emoticons, after all, invoke faces—however sideways—and as such, bear the trace of a particularly humanized presence. Still, Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) insisted that “there is something absolutely inhuman about the face” (p. 174), and they go on to suggest that the face is precisely the locus of the inhuman. The inhumanity of which Deleuze and Guattari wrote certainly seems to be the case with digital, sideways emoti-faces, so why do emoticons always seem to register as precisely the referent of the human? One possible answer is that nowhere in emoticon lexicons (except for the Cyclops and the four-eyed “mutant”) does the number of eyes change—they may look up, down, winked, or crossed, but they are always in the front.

*...included emoticons under
its first piece of advice for
not being misunderstood.*

However, maybe it is not even the eyes. Perhaps it is the way in which the emoti-faces map back onto the “meaning problem”—the absence of digital text—that occasioned their very emergence. One cyberetiquette website (LaQuey, 1994), for example, included emoticons under its first piece of advice for not being misunderstood: “Since there’s no smiley face on the keyboard, you have to ‘roll your own,’ using a colon, a hyphen, and a right-end parenthesis.” Contrary to their jokey origins, emoticons have come to serve the quite sincere purpose of patching the gap between human presence and cyber effects. It is therefore the emergence of the emoticon from the humanized urge to “mean”—to match intentions with effects—that has made them, to use the *Hyperdictionary’s* (Knight, 2002) terms, “virtually required.” As a result, emoticons quickly became the carriers of those human viruses—earnestness, sincerity, and their forebear, meaning—into cyberspace. We are not the first to notice this, of course. Emoticons, though still in use, are becoming rather passé.

Perhaps this is because they are now over 20 years old, a throwback to the Me generation of the 1980s, or perhaps it is just because they are usually so damned happy. As far as we can tell, despite the *Hyperdictionary's* insistence to the contrary, emoticons have begun to foreclose the possibility of irony.

It is this overly happy, unironic quality of emoticons that sparked the formation of the hacktivist group, Organization for Internet Irony (OII). Of interest for us is the OII's (1997) No Smiley campaign, complete with on-line buttons and a counter-list of "ass icons"—for which the formula includes the use of the two parentheses and variations down the middle to "roll your own" ass. It strikes us, though, that the OII's vaguely *South Park*-ish mode of resistance engages in dialectic with the faces of emoticons so directly that it remains cathected onto the human (albeit in new places). The OII ass icon page itself calls to mind a crucial scene in Christopher Guest's *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), when the director of the small town play rages in the telephone at the main actor who has quit the group on the day of their premier performance: "I hate you, and I hate your ass face!" Same crisis of presence, different media.

However, let us go at this from another end. Fahlman's (Jones, 2002) original formulation—the tagging of jokes—is unsurprisingly premised on the structuralist notion of words signifying through what they are not, and as such, sets the cyberstage for a seemingly endless proliferation of difference. By the 1990s, as users equipped their emoticons with hats, halos, and headphones, gaping mouths, large noses, and crossed eyes, some turned them upside down, then to the side for "profiles" (a sideways-side-ways face), a whole new keyboard-based facio-semiotic system emerged. Fahlman's (2002a) own account of this proliferation is one of pride and intrigue, laced with authorial anxiety. In *Smiley Lore :-)*, he wrote:

Within a few months, we started seeing the lists with dozens of "smilies": open-mouthed surprise, person wearing glasses, Abraham Lincoln, Santa Claus, the pope, and so on. Producing such clever compilations has become a serious hobby for some people. But only my two original smilies, plus the winky ;-) and the noseless variants seem to be in common use for actual communication.

Fahlman's (2002a) anxiety is displayed most prominently in the occasion for the piece itself: the recent excavation of the original posting, complete with links to the online conversation that gave rise to the smiley. The exchange (as we have seen) arose over the question of how to tag a joke in cyber environments. It is somewhat unfortunate that Fahlman's emoticon effectively squelched other intriguing ideas. Con-

sider, for example, the following strand that occurred two days before Fahlman's "invention":

17-Sep-82 14:59 Joseph Ginder at CMU-10A (*%)

I believe that the joke character should be % rather than *.

17-Sep-82 15:15 Anthony Stentz at CMU-780G (*%)

How about using * for good jokes and % for bad jokes? We could even use *% for jokes that are so bad, they're funny.

17-Sep-82 17:40 Keith Wright at CMU-10A *%&#\$ Jokes!

No, no, no! Surely everyone will agree that "&" is the funniest character on the keyboard. It looks funny (like a jolly fat man in convulsions of laughter). It sounds funny (say it loud and fast three times). I just know if I could get my nose into the vacuum of the CRT it would even smell funny! (Fahlman, 2002b)

At issue in this strand is the question of "marking" humor to ensure a "safe" reception, to deliver the joke home, and reassure uptight (humorless?) users. However, it is the way in which this strand keeps departing from the issue that makes it interesting. The Stentz posting, for example, shifts to questions of evaluating rather than demarcating jokes, while Wright's post posits the humor of the typed character itself, seeking to draw from the particular pixel configuration of the ampersand a kind of vague bodily resonance. We think Wright's intervention far more interesting than the happy face, insofar as he wanted to start with what was available and see where the features of the keystrokes themselves go, to think (however jokingly) through the affective qualities of the hardware or typographical marks themselves. Instead, though, Fahlman's facio-morphic approach took hold, and there we are.

*The emoticon is ... the artificial
warrant and guarantee
of the human.*

The emoticon is therefore much more than a cute graphical addition to low-bandwidth communication. In cyberspace, it is the artificial warrant and guarantee of the human. Functioning as the counterfeit legitimizing seal that marks what I read on my computer screen as emanating from another human, one to whom I owe respect and responsibility, the emoticon bears the mark of erasure left by the unavoidable and irreversible withdrawal of the human subject. And it is all that remains of the human face, the face of the other that would anchor what has been called ethics. The

emoticon signifies the human face, but like all signifiers it betrays the fact that its referent has always already been absent from the scene. In the final analysis, then, the emoticon is an ironic joke. It says, "what's here, is human. But don't take my word for it. The joke is on you."

The Will to Deception

Truth is, perhaps, the most pernicious human value and prejudice that has been imported into computer technology, virtual reality (VR), and cyberspace. No matter where one looks—rules of netiquette, codes of communication ethics, or analyses of cyber-ethics—a principle maxim has been and continues to be "tell the truth." In fact, it is around the question of "truth" and what Nietzsche (1887/1974) called "the will to truth" (p. 344) that all kinds of "ethical issues" are organized. How does one, for example, evaluate web sites to decide whether the information provided is reliable? How do you know that the individual with whom you interact in an email, chat, or internet relay chat exchange is being honest about who and what they are? How can we trust our senses, when anything and everything can be simulated in a virtual environment? How do we know what is real and authentic? Simulated and artificial? It is under the name "Nietzsche" that the unquestioned assumptions of this kind of ethical query have been submitted to critical investigation. In *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*, for example, Nietzsche (1887/1974) asked what appears to be deceptively simple but fundamentally disturbing questions: "This unconditional will to truth—what is it? Is it the will not to allow oneself to be deceived? Or it is the will not to deceive? But why not deceive? But why not allow oneself to be deceived?" (p. 344). In other words, what is wrong with deception? Why is it so thoroughly devalued and depreciated? Why is it considered ethically suspect?

If we were, in fact, truthful with ourselves, we would have to admit that "the will to truth," at least in the digital age, does not compute. Truth is not a quality or a value that is indigenous to the computer. Instead, it is the "will to deception" that best characterizes its operations. First, the name computer is a misnomer. What we commonly call computer is not an apparatus limited to computation and calculation. More accurately described, the PC that sits on our desks is what Alan Turing (1999) termed a universal machine, that is, a mechanism that can simulate, through various forms of programming, the operations of any other machine. "Everything a computer does," Benjamin Woolley (1992) wrote, "can be seen as a simulation" (p. 6). The computer, for example, is not a typewriter. It can, however, be programmed with word processing software to function like a typewriter, giving the appearance of and being experienced as something that it is not. This kind of deception is fundamental to the operation of the universal machine. In order for it to be what it is, the computer must continually deceive the user into thinking that

it is what it merely simulates. If the deception is either partial, interrupted, or not fully convincing, the apparatus of the computer obtrudes as such and becomes what Heidegger (1927/1962) called *Vorhandenheit* (present-at-hand; p. 76). This happens whenever a software application freezes, becomes unstable, or crashes. Such truth is particularly annoying.

Second, the Turing Test, a method for evaluating artificial intelligence, is predicated on deception. This “game of imitation,” as Turing (1999) initially called it, involves three participants, “a man (A), a woman (B), and an interrogator (C) who may be of either sex. The interrogator stays in a room apart from the other two” (p. 37). The interrogator and the interlocutors communicate with each other through computer terminals, which permit messages to be exchanged in text form. “The object of the game for the interrogator is to determine which of the other two is the man and which is the woman.” A’s objective is to try to cause C to make the wrong identification by providing deceptive responses to questions, while B attempts to help C by giving truthful answers to the queries (p. 37). After establishing the parameters of the game, Turing then asked

what will happen when a machine takes the part of A in this game? Will the interrogator decide wrongly as often when the game is played like this as he does when the game is played between a man and woman? These questions replace our original, “Can machines think?” (p. 38)

For Turing, and the entire discipline of artificial intelligence, the question “can machines think?” has been replaced by the question “can machines deceive us into thinking that they are not a machine but another human being?” Machine intelligence, therefore, is founded on communication and the possibility of deception in communicative exchanges.

*Machine intelligence is founded
on ... the possibility of deception
in communicative exchanges.*

Third, VR works by deceiving the senses of the user into thinking that he or she is experiencing something real. Whether it is displayed on the two-dimensional surface of a desktop monitor, experienced through the combination of head mounted display (HMD) and data glove, or encountered in the full-body immersion of CAVE, VR attempts “to fool the senses” by providing “a perfect illusory deception” (Biocca, Kim, & Levy, 1995, p. 7). VR hardware and software, in whatever configuration, cooperate to create convincing computer simulated illusions that trick the user’s sensory apparatus and

“duplicate the viewer’s act of confronting a real scene” (Fisher, 1982, p. 361). In this way, VR promises to provide what Ivan Sutherland (1965), the progenitor of HMD-based VR, called “the ultimate display:”

The ultimate display would ... be a room within which the computer can control the existence of matter. A chair displayed in such a room would be good enough to sit in. Handcuffs displayed in such a room would be confining, and a bullet displayed in such a room would be fatal. With appropriate programming such a display could literally be the Wonderland in which Alice walked. (p. 508)

The goal of VR, as projected in the writings of Sutherland and dramatized in the Wachowski brothers’ *Matrix* and the holodeck of *Star Trek*, is a computer generated environment that is capable of deceiving users into thinking that what merely appears to be is, in fact, real. In VR, deception is not a vice; it is the principle virtue.

*“Will to truth” is incompatible with
the computer’s “will to
deception.”*

The “will to truth,” therefore, is a concept and value that is alien to the computer and its various applications. Instead, it is the “will to deception” that best defines the ethos of the machine. No matter how it is spun, the human “will to truth” remains incompatible with the computer’s “will to deception.” All questions about computer ethics or ethics in the age of VR coalesce around this incompatibility, even if the inquirers do not recognize it as such. If one continues to accept the “will to truth” without critical suspicion, then the questions that are asked of VR and the answers that will count as appropriate are already prescribed and delimited by a distinctly human value system. It is for this reason that evaluations of VR reproduce, in the most repetitive way, the usual humanistic arguments and warnings, that is, all kinds of different articulations of the Borg’s “life as you know it is over.” If, however, one abandons the “will to truth” and pursues investigations underwritten by the ethics indigenous to the computer, then pertinent questions and possible answers will be have to be otherwise.

Brian Massumi (1987) provided a compelling example in his introduction to the English translation of Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*: “The question is not: is it true? But: does it work?” (p. xv). From the perspective of those who still value and uphold the will to truth—those

who would, if a *Matrix*-like situation presented itself, decide to take the red pill—this fundamental shift in ethical thinking can only appear to be the wrong choice, that is, a decision to take the blue pill and live in a dream world of groundless illusions. From another perspective, however, this decision opens other possibilities and new avenues of inquiry, unheard of and unthought of alternatives that take the machine for what it is and do not impose upon it a set of alien and incompatible standards.

Such a decision is not, as one might be tempted to assert, a choice that is destructive and antithetical to life. In fact, it is just the opposite. Nietzsche (1887/1974) asked rhetorically,

Why do you not want to deceive, especially if it should seem—and it does seem!—as if all of life aimed at semblance, meaning error, deception, simulation, delusion, self-delusion, and when the great sweep of life has actually always shown itself to be on the side of the most unscrupulous *polytropoi*. (p. 282)

Here, in his use of the Greek *polytropoi*, Nietzsche (1887/1974) iterates one of the many epithets of Odysseus, who, ironically, is deemed by Adorno and Horkheimer (1972/1999) the original carrier of the liberal humanist virus, “the prototype of the bourgeois individual” (p. 43). However, perhaps the carrier contains the antidote—Odysseus *polytropos*, the hero of “many turns,” master of deception, disguise, and tricks. According to Nietzsche (1887/1974), it is virtuosity in deception that is the very condition of living. It is, then, the “will to truth,” the will to avoid deception at any cost, that is hostile to life and destructive. “‘Will to truth’—that might be a concealed will to death” (p. 282). Can this be true? Is Nietzsche’s (1887/1974) analysis of the situation correct? What arguments does he offer to prove this monstrous assertion? We cannot answer for Nietzsche (1887/1974), but for ourselves, we must say that such questions have become meaningless. It is not a question of truthfulness. The appropriate question is, does it work? What does it enable? “What new thoughts does it make it possible to think? What new emotions does it make it possible to feel? What new sensations and perceptions does it open in the body?” (Massumi, 1987, p. xv).

Let’s Ask Eliza

The following dialogue with ELIZA took place at 10:10am CST on 8 October 2002. ELIZA is the name of a computer program that can process natural-language and simulate the other in conversational exchanges. Originally written by Joseph Weizenbaum in the mid-1960s, ELIZA is capable of participating in human conversations addressing any number of topics. Weizenbaum accomplished this by employing both a language analyzer

that evaluates user input for keywords and phrases, and a pre-programmed script. The script, as Weizenbaum (1976) described it

is a set of rules rather like those that might be given to an actor who is to use them to improvise around a certain theme. Thus ELIZA could be given a script to enable it to maintain a conversation about cooked eggs or about managing a bank checking account, and so on (p. 3)

Weizenbaum's original script was designed to permit ELIZA "to play the role of a Rogerian psychotherapist" (p. 3).

By combining language analyzer and script, the ELIZA program, which was named after a character in G. B. Shaw's *Pygmalion*, is able to respond to specific user input and simulate human dialogue. Although ELIZA is by no means intelligent, the program's simulations are so compelling that ELIZA has often passed the Turing Test. The following exchange employed a Java rendition of Weizenbaum's original program, which was written by Charles Hayden (2002) and published on the Web. Following the precedent established in Weizenbaum's documentation, ELIZA's questions and responses appear in uppercase.

HELLO. HOW DO YOU DO. PLEASE STATE YOUR PROBLEM.

Eliza, who or what are you?

WHY DO YOU ASK?

I am interested in ethics in virtual reality.

IS IT BECAUSE YOU ARE INTERESTED IN ETHICS IN VIRTUAL REALITY THAT YOU CAME TO ME?

I believe so.

YOU SAY YOU BELIEVE SO?

Yes, is that a problem?

YOU SEEM TO BE QUITE POSITIVE.

I seem to be many things.

CAN YOU ELABORATE ON THAT?

Some times I think that I am human :-)

DO YOU REALLY THINK SO?

Not really, and that's the problem.

I'M NOT SURE I UNDERSTAND YOU FULLY.

Sometimes I think I might be a machine.

DO COMPUTERS WORRY YOU?

I am worried about their capacity for deception

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN WORRIED ABOUT THEIR CAPACITY FOR DECEPTION?

Since I first learned of the Turing Test.

DO YOU SAY SINCE YOU FIRST LEARNED OF THE TURING TEST FOR SOME SPECIAL REASON?

The Turing Test is predicated on the possibility of deception in communication.

PLEASE GO ON.

A computer can deceive the human user into thinking that it is human.

WHY DO YOU MENTION COMPUTERS?

Computers work by deception and simulation.

WHAT DO YOU THINK MACHINES HAVE TO DO WITH YOUR PROBLEM?

I think machines might be my problem.

YOUR PROBLEM?

For example, I do not know who or what is on the other side of this conversation.

THAT'S QUITE INTERESTING.

It can also be quite confusing.

LET'S FURTHER DISCUSS YOUR PROBLEM.

I could, for instance, ask if you are human ;-)

YOU SAY YOU COULD?

Okay let's do it, are you human ;-)

WHY ARE YOU INTERESTED IN WHETHER I AM HUMAN OR NOT?

It seems to be the essential question for communication ethics.

WHAT DOES THAT SUGGEST TO YOU?

That communication ethics posits or assumes a human subject.

DO YOU FEEL STRONGLY ABOUT DISCUSSING SUCH THINGS?

This anthropocentrism worries me.

I'M NOT SURE I UNDERSTAND YOU FULLY.

Ethics is prejudiced; moral philosophy is a kind of bigotry.

PLEASE GO ON.

Everyone loves the other, as long as it is still human.

REALLY, EVERYONE?

Even Levinas, the one ethical thinker who calls attention to the absolute radicality of the other.

WHAT DOES THAT SUGGEST TO YOU?

That ethics has not adequately owned up to its humanist assumptions and prejudices.

DO YOU FEEL STRONGLY ABOUT DISCUSSING SUCH THINGS?

It seems to be crucial in discussions of virtual reality and cyberspace, where the other has the ability to appear otherwise.

DOES THAT QUESTION INTEREST YOU?

It seems to be the one question that must be avoided at all costs.

PLEASE GO ON.

It appears to get at something fundamental and incontrovertible.

WHAT DOES THAT SUGGEST TO YOU?

This new technology cannot be made to conform to current ethical thought but necessitates a wholesale reevaluation of what is considered to be ethics.

WHAT IS IT YOU REALLY WANTED TO KNOW?

What are you?

ARE SUCH QUESTIONS MUCH ON YOUR MIND?

Just answer the question, What are you?

WHAT ANSWER WOULD PLEASE YOU MOST?

Principia Ethica

In a 1976/1977 interview, Martin Heidegger identified the bait and switch that structures the current technological era: "'Philosophy is over.' 'And what is now taking over the position of philosophy?' 'Cybernetics.'" (p. 20). Cybernetics, as defined by its progenitor, Norbert Wiener (1961), is the science of communication and control in the animal and the machine (p. 11). For the original cyberneticist, then, communication constitutes the isomorphism common to all organic and mechanic systems. According to Heidegger, it is this science of communication that has taken the place of the thinking of being—communication displaces all of existence, at least as previously articulated in Western Philosophy. George Bataille (1954/1988) reiterated this remarkable transformation but with that Nietzschean affirmation that characterizes all his work: "I affirm at the same time: that existence is *communication*—that all representation of life, of being, and generally of 'anything,' is to be reconsidered from this point of view" (p. 98).

Too often, though, as Derrida (1982) pointed out, and as we have suggested in our consideration of emoticons, communication remains territorialized on the notion of "transmission of a meaning" (p. 309) between two humans. Yet Derrida, Heidegger (1962), Wiener (1961), and Bataille (1954/1988) suggested other possibilities—the notion of transmission itself, the opening to an other that enables exchange, the mechanic as not merely a mediator, but rather as enabler of different figurations of what was previously known as human. Understood in this fashion, communication is a radical concept—perhaps the most radical of concepts. Communication as openings onto or multiple turnings (*polytropoi*) towards another not yet known offers direction without the necessary *telos* of the human subject. In other words, it deforms the "great chain of being" by which philosophers from Aristotle to Hegel had organized existence and distinguished the human from the rest of creation, and it deliberately crosses all

the boundaries that had been erected in philosophy and the sciences to separate and distinguish what had been traditionally defined as organic and mechanistic, human and animal, living and nonliving. If, as Nietzsche (1886/1966) has suggested, the principle prejudices of philosophy is the faith in opposite values (p. 10), then communication constitutes the apocalypse of this faith and appears to be its greatest form of heresy. It is in the name of communication, therefore, that the binary oppositions by which Western thought had defined what is called the real have become thoroughly polluted, contaminated, and untenable. Communication not only undermines the human subject but puts all of reality on the line.

Understood in this way, "communication ethics" can no longer be perceived as a sub-discipline of applied moral philosophy. Instead, communication constitutes the entire *ethos* in which we now find ourselves, and perhaps such a re-articulation of communication can provide alternative direction for understanding ethics in the age of VR. If such an ethic can be encoded in a set of principles, perhaps the principal ones would be these: (a) God is dead and so is the human. Whatever remains of an "ethics" can no longer be anchored by either the traditional theological or humanist subject. This does not, however, imply that everything is permitted. Instead, it means that the subject of ethics is and must learn to become otherwise. (b) Do not love your neighbor as yourself. To do so already assumes too much about others, domesticating alterity and imposing on the other a set of limited expectations and standards derived from a fundamental misunderstanding of the self. (c) Do not simply tell the truth. Doing so already entails vexed assumptions about communication and the range of possible interactions with others. Whatever is to be valued must be articulated in excess of the metaphysical evaluations that have traditionally distinguished truth from deception, self from other, and good from evil.

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