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The Internet: Beyond Ethics?

The Internet throws up a number of serious ethical issues at just the time when ethical resources are few and far between. Various reasons for this state of affairs are discussed, several of which show a continuity rather than a disjuncture with other communication and information technologies (CITs). These include exaggerating the 'newness' of the Internet, and forgetting that technology is a human activity, always amenable to ethical critique. It is suggested that the contribution of CITs to postmodern (un)realities puts the Internet in a peculiar position. While modern rationalities, including ethical ones, may be in doubt, by bringing users into more indirect relationships, the Internet also sharpens the question of 'otherness' and thus points the way to a relevant and potentially fruitful category for an Internet ethics.

Key words: Internet, communication and information technologies, ethics, morality, post/modern, rationality.

Introduction

The Internet has expanded exponentially and has attracted huge international interest especially since the mid-1990s. What began as a military research tool spread into universities in the later 1980's, and by the 1990's featured in government policy as a means of facilitating economic growth. While some attention has been paid to its 'dark side'—seen particularly in its handling of pornographic and hate materials—a number of factors make it peculiarly elusive to ethical analysis. Let me mention three of them.

One, some hail the Internet as a harbinger of an 'information age' or of 'virtual community',[1] thus stressing its 'newness' and its apparent moral benignity. This tendency to technological determinism deflects attention from the Internet's continuity with other communication and information technologies (CITs) and gives it an inherently positive aura. Ethics, if mentioned at all, is seen as having to 'catch up' with developments.

Two, conventional ethics has paid information technologies all-too-little attention. While new reproductive technologies or biotechnologies have received extensive coverage, information technologies remain largely outside the realm of current ethical debate. This is despite the great potential for political, commercial and even intellectual manipulation using information technologies, including the Internet.

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1 Rheingold, H. *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, New York: Addison-Wesley (1993).

Three, even if one is sceptical of Internet hype, and even if one believes that ethical assessment should be attempted, difficulties remain. By placing the Internet in a broader social and cultural context, it quickly becomes apparent that changes are indeed occurring. But these are not mere technological changes. The Internet is developing in a world of political fragmentation, social upheaval and cultural diversity. Among other things, a typically modern legislative approach to ethics is crumbling—not least under pressure from the new technologies themselves.

This paper criticises the 'novelty' phenomenon, and proposes that an ethics of Internet can be developed, rooted in an existing technological ethic, but also sensitive to the emerging contexts of ethical debate. Different kinds of ethical problem are distinguished and explored, and an ethics of alterity (or the 'Other') is proposed as a guide for shaping and using the Internet. The Internet is revealed as a window on a whole range of issues in which ethical issues may be raised. Some of these may be approached by expanding the range of conventional ethics, while others require fresh and perhaps radical approaches.

1. Internet hype and the real world

New technologies are often greeted as panaceas—solutions eagerly seeking problems. Communication technologies are especially prone to such use. The telephone, radio and television each have had their moment of glory as the great technical fix, with the potential to reunite the human family in the global village. The Internet is no exception. Despite its military origins, its academic youth, and its commercial maturity, it is still viewed variously as the last frontier of free speech, the ultimate means of human interconnection and, of course, the saviour of ailing economies. As Don Tapscott puts it, 'We are the dawn of the age of Networked Intelligence, an age that is giving birth to a new economy, a new politics and a new society'.[2]

At one end of the hype spectrum, the 'neuromanticism' of cyberspace frequently ignores the real world altogether. It is a dream-world, an escape into a virtual realm where social relationships, even the body-of-flesh, can cheerfully be forgotten.[3] Here we may play God, lose ourselves in a simulated space, become other than what we were made. For Jean Baudrillard, 'reality itself is hyperrealistic . . . an aesthetic hallucination of reality'.[4] Such issues are not insignificant, but there are other, less dramatic, questions of interest to those seeking an Internet ethic.

Most Internet enthusiasts see the 'new world' as one waiting to be made. They note both promise and peril, opportunity and threat on the Internet. If only we 'get it right' all will be well. At the same time, things are changing all around, at a rapid pace. Those who fail to adapt will go to

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2 Tapscott, D. *The Digital Economy*, New York: McGraw-Hill (1996).
3 Robins, K. 'Cyberspace and the world we live in', *Body and Society* (1995) 1, 35–155
4 Poster, M. (ed.) *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, Cambridge: Polity Press (1989).

the wall. The greatest threat thus appears to be not to take advantage of the Internet as fast as possible. The weight of emphasis falls squarely on entrepreneurial handling of technological change and its potential or actual impacts. Thus the ways that the technologies are shaped and the contexts in which they develop, are downplayed.

This has at least three consequences. Firstly, the continuity of both the Internet and its social context with preceding situations remains in the background. All the focus is on the alleged newness of technology and society. While it is important to understand the potentially far-reaching ramifications of the Internet, the danger of the a-historical approach is that previous experiences—and previous technological utopianism—will be ignored. Many claims made at an early stage for the telephone never materialised; likewise with early dreams of a CIT-based 'information society'.[5,6]

Secondly, by stressing the 'technology' side of the equation, much on the 'society' side is assumed. Yet nothing should be taken for granted here either. The Internet is actually used by some very specific groups of people, and as it expands both users and usages will alter. Nothing is static. For instance, academic users found further uses of the Internet than the original military research users, and many more academic users were women. As commercialisation occurred, and with it advertising on the Net, more specific groups were targeted, for particular purposes. Let us focus for a moment on the question of users.

What do we know about Internet users? This is a vital question, but one that is notoriously hard to answer. Net hype extends to overcalculating the number of users worldwide (it was over 30 million; estimates are now more sober). In Canada, where I live, as many as 30% of the adult population have had some direct exposure to the Internet (from home, school, or a public facility like a library). Of these, however, 70% are men (though this proportion is steadily decreasing), 32% are under 35 (compared with 24% in the general population), 51% have a university degree, 78% are in full or part time employment (typically with high incomes), and 26% are professionals. Given the predominance of English on the Net, Quebec has an understandably lower rate of use, as do rural areas compared to urban.[7]

This tallies with a study of UK users by Wired magazine, which again 'shows the Net to be a lot like the suburbs: rich, white, well-educated and looking to get ahead'.[8] The proportion of UK users (5%) is lower than in North America, but in other demographic respects they are similar: young,

5 Lyon, D. *The Information Society: Issues and Illusions*, Cambridge: Polity Press (1988).
6 Raulet, G. 'The New Utopia: Communication Technologies', *Telos* (1987) Spring Issue, 39–58.
7 Group, A.R. *Canadians and the Internet*, Toronto: ARG (1996).
8 Browning, J. 'Who's what on the Web', *Wired* (UK edition) (1996), 2:8, August, 3–5.

educated, employed, and so on. Like their counterparts in North America, they are increasingly likely to surf the Net from home.

Not only do these proportions plummet when one examines the situation in the south, the modes of usage are also different. While it is true that great potential benefits hang on the expansion of the Net in Africa, Latin America, or China[9] the actual trajectories of Net development must also be borne in mind. Even if the necessary (telephone-based) infrastructures were to be adequately established in such countries, by the time they are in place, the education-research aspect of the Net, that pioneered northern usage, will have given way to commercial predominance.[10,11] Already, most systems used in the south are based in the north, and market values and usages have become predominant. This is hardly 'new'.

The third consequence of downplaying continuities and being mesmerised by the 'new' is that the Internet is portrayed as essentially good—with just a few glitches yet to be fixed. Now, the last thing I want to be heard saying is that the opposite is true—the Internet is all bad. How could I? My life as a researcher and professor is enhanced by daily contact with numerous colleagues and students locally and worldwide, courtesy of e-mail, and I also learn much through the Web. Rather, the point is to see the Internet as a form of technological practice, and thus subject, like all other practices, to normative assessment and ethical critique.[12–14]

2. Technology, globalisation and ethical dilemmas

The quest for an Internet ethics confronts a nasty conundrum. At just the moment when the urgent need for such ethics is realised, ethical resources seem to have dwindled away to a tiny trickle. There are several reasons for this unhappy state of affairs. One is historical. Technological development and the education of engineers have largely taken place without explicit reference to ethical criteria. The highly successful—but perversely false—conceptual separation between 'construction' and 'use' of technological systems gave rise to what might be called the 'von Braun syndrome'. (Wernher von Braun is reputed to have denied any responsibility for actual uses of the V-2 missile that he developed in Germany before defecting to the USA during the Second World War. Yet alternative uses of such missiles are hard to imagine.)

A second reason for the mismatch between technology-ethical dilemmas and resources for handling them is their scope, or scale. The

9 Panos (1995) 'The Internet and the South: Superhighway or Dirt-Track?', "http://www.oneworld.org/panos/panos_internet_press.html#references".
10 Renaud, P. and Torres, A. 'Internet: une chance pour le sud', Le Monde Diplomatique (1996), fevrier, p. 25.
11 Lyon, D. 'New Technology and the Information Society: Whose Vision?' *Transformation* (1993) October, 11–16.
12 Lyon, D. 'Tubal-Cain and High-Tech', *Arena* (1987), March, 2–5.
13 See Ref. 5.
14 Monsma, S. (ed.) *Responsible Technology*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1980).

ancient Jewish Torah, dating from the 7th century BC, helpfully offers technological guidelines. Building techniques, for instance, included making parapets on flat roofs to avoid falling accidents, and agricultural practices required that fields be left fallow to recover their richness. But today's environment of risk involves technological developments with global, long-term and potentially irreversible consequences. This is certainly true of the Internet, which for example introduces a new phase of global marketing, sidestepping local regulations and customs of trading. The massive size, polymorphous character, and constantly shifting 'membership' of groups involved in the Internet is a far cry from identifiable, inclusive-exclusive, face-to-face relations.

Thirdly, technological momentum is a crucial factor, making technological development less amenable to ethical critique. This involves both the pace of change, which has a feel of constant acceleration, and the inherent drive that new technologies acquire. This is not a species of technological determinism. Social shaping and human choices are always present in technological innovation although they have more impact during the early stages of system development.[15] By the time ethical quandaries are apparent, it may be too late to make significant alterations to the system.

A further difficulty, when approaching the general problem of CIT ethics (of which the Internet is a special case) is that other technologies have been more in the moral limelight. As Dorothy Nelkin observes, 'technology out of control' is more usually taken to refer to nuclear, or, now, bio-technologies, than to CITs. While biomedical research has borne the brunt of popular critique for their moral threat, their risks or for the role of the profit motive, CITs tend to be viewed much more positively. Yet the latter may intrude on privacy, allow organisations to control their clients, and threaten democratic values.[16] Resistance is vociferous against tampering with the body. Few groups express anxiety about the CITs' capacity to tamper with the mind.

If we do put CITs in ethical focus, however, several categories of risk can be identified and elaborated in relation to the Internet. Some of them relate directly to older, well-established ethics, and can be extended to the Internet, while others, particularly those relating to scale, have few obvious precedents. David Pullinger[17] lists these as follows.

The first category is changes to social life, especially to modes of work and organisation. Undoubtedly, the diffusion of CITs has been implicated in alterations to patterns of production and consumption, especially since the 1970s. The use of the Internet to facilitate long-distance working and

15 Hughes, T. 'Technological momentum', in Smith, M.R. and Marx, L. (eds.) *Does Technology Drive History?* (1994).
16 Nelkin, D. 'Against the Tide of Technology', The Times Higher (1993), July 23, 13–14.
17 Pullinger, D. 'Information Technology Ethics', in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, Leicester UK: IVP (1995).

transactional relations, along with its rise as a means of business communication, is likely to facilitate further changes. More broadly, the question looms of the long-term consequences of the declining proportion of face-to-face relationships—for trust, responsibility and accountability.[18]

A second area is information access and privacy. With regard to the Internet, we have already touched on the disparities of access (see further in Ref.19).[19] Intellectual property rights is another hot issue here. As for privacy, this is seen by many as the major question, given that e-mail still accounts for the largest proportion of Internet use.[20,21] But commercial use increasingly raises questions of the security of data, for instance credit card numbers transmitted on the Net.

The question most frequently referred to as 'privacy' is hardly new, of course, but interest in the issue has crystallised and intensified with the development of computerised personal databases since the 1970s.[22,23] While worries about social control by policing or government departments still exercise civil libertarians who watch the progress of the Internet, fears about commercial surveillance and about security risks are also more widespread. At the same time, it is curious that junk mail (often targeted to specific mailboxes by computer) and reading credit card numbers over the telephone have never attracted quite the same interest, which may say something about the mystique of the Internet.

Thirdly, Pullinger mentions data quality questions—are the data true? What is their quality, their context? This has Internet echoes in many ways. In the world of the electronic academy, new criteria have to be developed for the reliability of sources when so much can be communicated without the traditional processes of peer review. It also resonates with publicly visible worries concerning the use of the Internet for hate propaganda or pornography.

A final area for ethical concern is less tangible but no less significant. It has to do with CITs as stimulating new images, metaphors for social interaction and for our senses of self. This is part of the cultural dimension of CITs, and within the Internet its significance is profound. The reason for this is not so much that H. G. Wells' 'world brain' really is just around the electronic corner, or even the apparent malleability of identity ('. . . on the

18 Lyon, D. 'Cyberspace sociality: Controversies over computer-mediated communication', in Loader, B. (ed.) *The Governance of Cyberspace*, London and Boston: Routledge, (1996).

19 Fortner, R. 'Excommunication in the Information Society', *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* (1995) 12, 133–154.

20 Weisband, S. and Reinig, B. 'Managing user perceptions of email privacy', *Communications of the ACM* (1996)38, 40–47.

21 Sipior, J. and Ward, B. 'The ethical and legal quandary of email privacy', *Communications of the ACM* (1996) 38, 48–54.

22 Lyon, D.*The Electronic Eye: The Rise of Surveillance Society*, Cambridge: Polity Press/ Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1994).

23 Lyon, D. and Zureik, E. (eds.) *Computers, Surveillance and Privacy*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1996).

Net, no one knows you're a dog' runs the celebrated New Yorker cartoon of the keyboard mutt). No, the significance of this cultural dimension of CITs is that they coincide with, and are implicated in, cultural changes affecting the future of modernity itself. In turn, it is bound up with new ways of handling political, social and economic power.[24]

Sherry Turkle, who did much to alert us to the ways that the computer can function as a 'second self' has more recently argued that what she calls 'life on the screen' reflects challenges to, and possibility the exhaustion of, modernity itself. As she says, 'In a surprising and counter-intuitive twist . . . the mechanical engines of computers have been grounding the radically non-mechanical philosophy of postmodernism'.[25] Turkle has in mind queries of how far we have become 'cyborgs, a transgressive mixture of biology, technology and code', but it also raises the crucial question of what sorts of ethical approaches can be applied to phenomena such as the Internet.[26]

3. Modern computer ethics and postmodern morality

Turkle is not the first to write about the paradoxes of high technology helping to produce the unstable meanings of the postmodern, but she certainly writes elegantly and persuasively. For the student, the classical computer class had everything to do with calculation and rules. The approaches of computer ethics—where such existed—also related to this world of rules. Contemporary classes concern simulation, navigation, interaction (p. 19). But Turkle does not attempt to elaborate the implications of the emerging cultural context for normative approaches to CITs.

An interesting paradox lies here, that however much Internet traffic may be characterised as freewheeling, anarchistic, it still depends technologically on some rather non-negotiable computational standards. Many so-called postmodern phenomena are in this way parasitic on or symbiotic with the modern, in this case, modern scientific rationality. At the same time, to imagine that either kind of phenomena, modern or postmodern, is entirely amenable to rule by formula or algorithm, is to espouse a rather unrealistic legalism. 'Applying rules' has only limited ethical value here.

Not surprisingly, then, attempts to legislate—to introduce new rules—for the Internet have run into great hostility. During 1996, for example, the US Communications Decency Act came into being, only to be challenged immediately in the courts. The Act is intended to limit the use of the Internet for pornographic or hate-inciting purposes, but flies in the face of the fervently held belief of countless 'netizens' in the free flow of information. Not only do many 'electronic frontier' people object to censorship in

24 Holderness, M., In Taylor, M. (ed.) *Imagologies*, London and Boston: Routledge (1994).
25 Turkle, S. (1995) *Life on the Screen*, Cambridge:Massachusetts: MIT (1995), p. 17.
26 Lyon, D. 'Hazard Warning', *Third Way* (1994), October, 22–25.

principle, they also question whether legislation could possibly be made to work in a medium designed to evade obstructions.[27]

Other approaches have been proposed by Internet users. In a discussion of 'Hate on the Net' two alternatives to legislation are aired. The first is to expose hate materials, to counter them on their own terms, and to provide alternative viewpoints. A CyberWatch section has been added to the Weisenthal Center's Web site, for example, to monitor 'antisemitism, racism and bigotry'. Another approach is to use direct action—hacking. The Nation of Islam's Homepage was defaced on the day after the Million Man March in October 1995, and some believe that this could be the start of more sinister electronic warfare.[28]

These two approaches each appeal to the Net as a 'free marketplace of ideas' and cast doubt on the relevance of regulation. It must be observed, however, that neither approach is thoroughly convincing. As Rabbi Abraham Cooper, of the Weisenthal Centre, notes, 'the Internet can give the erroneous impression that all information is of the same value'. For how long can any system tolerate the dissemination of falsehood or disinformation? As for hacking, this would appear to allow one person or group 'freely' to use the Net to curtail the 'freedom' of another.

I use these examples of hate and pornography on the Net not to suggest that they are the most significant ethical challenges, but rather to show what kinds of dilemma are posed by the Net. They demonstrate neatly the shift from legislative approaches to the free market, which is symptomatic of movement towards the postmodern. Behind all this are two factors: One, the radical doubt cast by what might be called postmodern thinkers, upon the certainties, whether scientific or ethical, of the modern era. Two, the actual alterations in social life occurring in the late twentieth century, which themselves have significant affinities with CITs.

The first, more philosophical factor, is the rise of postmodernism, which is fundamentally Nietzschean in character. For Nietzsche, 'there are no ethical phenomena; only an ethical interpretation of phenomena. And this interpretation is of non-ethical origin'. He wished, as he said, to go 'beyond good and evil', and that is just where some contemporary philosophy is following him. Behind Nietzsche, of course, lay the rise of the autonomous self, which in turn reflected and accelerated the demise of theism (see Ref. 29 for a good discussion of these themes).[29] And it was this autonomous self who shouldered the burden of ethical choice in modern times, assisted by the legislative power of the state.

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27 Shallitt, J. (1995) Address found at:
"http://tdg.res.uoguelph.ca/ ~ ipirg/public_int/efc_net95.txt".
28 Hipschman, D. (1996) 'Dealing with Hate on the Net', found at
"http://www-e1c.gnn.com/gnn/wr/nov10/features/hate/index.htmll".
29 Lundin, R. *The Culture of Interpretation*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1993).

But postmodernism does not exist on its own. It grows symbiotically with postmodernity.[30] The latter designates an emerging set of social-cultural conditions which, among other things, render everyday life increasingly fragmentary, episodic and inconsequential.[31] They relate strongly to the growth of a consumer-oriented culture and to the predominance of exchanges transacted at a distance rather than face-to-face. In this context, it is not merely elite philosophies that question established authority or the supposed superiority of human over animal—or, now, machine—life. Such questions have come down to earth, and are encountered with peculiar intensity by those closest to CITs, especially on the Internet.

While some popular expressions of the postmodern give the impression that 'anything goes' this does not by any means exhaust the debate. The rise of postmodernity has actually given rise to some profound efforts to rethink ethical questions. For instance, as Steven Connor says, 'the lack of absolute values no more makes all other values interchangeable than the absence of an agreed gold standard makes all world currencies worth the same'.[32] And Zygmunt Bauman, commenting on the continuing need for morality, does so assuming that neither God nor the state are much help any more.[33]

The issues raised about the Internet are echoed in Bauman's essays on postmodern morality. The prevalence of market values, and the transitory, piecemeal and uncommitted characteristics of life in postmodern times are his starting point. While this is not the place to expound his ideas, we may derive benefit from focussing directly on his key propositions. He insists that 'we are, so to speak, ineluctably—existentially—moral beings; that is, we are faced with the challenge of the Other, which is the challenge of responsibility for the Other, a condition of being-for'.[33]

Bauman sees this as part of a secular approach to morality, appropriate to postmodern times. But it does not lessen the fact that, one, some of his work refers approvingly to the moral philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, for whom the 'Other' has a theistic (Jewish) ring, and two, that this also resonates with some of the deepest currents of Christian ethics, starting with the story of the 'Good Samaritan'.[34] The Samaritan demonstrated that neighbourly action involves acknowledging and transcending difference—

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30 Lyon, D. *Postmodernity*, Milton Keynes: Open University Press/ Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press (1994).
31 Bauman, Z. *Intimations of Postmodernity*, London and Boston: Routledge (1992).
32 Connor, S. *The necessity of value in Principled Positions: Postmodernism and the Rediscovery of Value*, London: Lawrence and Wishart (1993).
33 Bauman, Z. *Life in Fragments*, Oxford UK and Cambridge MA: Blackwell (1995).
34 Lyon, D. 'Sliding in all directions? Social hermeneutics from suspicion to retrieval', in Lundin, R. (ed.) *Hermeneutics and Christian World-View*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans (1996).

in this case ethnic and religious—that otherwise prevented recognition, let alone care for the other.

In the later twentieth century, along with migration, mobility, and tourism, CITs have done much to highlight difference. The cultural, ethnic and religious 'other' has been brought into homes and workplaces first by TV and now also by computer screens. The resulting new dimensions of cultural, ethnic and religious conflict and violence show that this is a crucial area for ethical reflection and action. As far as CITs in general, and the Internet in particular are concerned, relations are facilitated with 'faceless' others, which may be why racist and pornographic groups in particular flourish.

Considerations involving the 'other' may have further implications for Internet ethics. One area is that of so-called virtual neighbours, friendships and communities. Given the earlier comments about Internet users, it is probable that such groups encourage homogeneity, rather than the sometimes less comfortable—because more challenging—heterogeneity of neighbours that one finds in conventional 'real life'. By definition, groups using the Internet are 'interest' groups, which is why they have proliferated so rapidly. While there may be nothing intrinsically wrong with this, the ethical ramifications of thus creating divisions between ourselves and others are potentially far-reaching.

One other area of interest here is the machine 'other' with whom Internet users may interact. These may be entirely machine-human relations, or human relations with the 'cyborg' (the person whose capacities are as-it-were prosthetically extended by CITs). While as yet little is known about these kinds of relationships, it is clear that the debate over the reality of human-machine relations will only be further stimulated by the development of the Internet. In the case of ancient ethics from the Torah, mentioned above, relations with the non-human (for instance, fields and animals) are treated with great moral seriousness. Whether or not it is concluded that the language of 'otherness' should be reserved for inter-human relations, human-machine relations will increasingly become a topic for ethical analysis.

These then are some of the ways in which a reminder of the primal significance of the Other relates to a quest for Internet ethics. Whether the issue is pornography or hate, intellectual property or the isolating effects of Internet addiction, raising awareness of responsibilities to the Other is appropriate. If Usergroup members recalled that, sitting at a keyboard somewhere else in the world, is an Other, with a face and with feelings, there might be less flaming (angry on-line outbursts). If instead of cyborg dreams of personal power to construct one's own electronic universe there was a concern for how the Internet could be used to benefit the Other, there might be a chance to reverse the rights-obsession that currently vitiates social life in both real and virtual worlds.

Conclusion

The Internet presents considerable challenges for ethics, not because it is new but because it is emerging at a time when technology ethics is hard to do. Technology ethics is poorly developed, has not been integrated into the curriculum of today's system designers, and now has to be considered at the level of global risk. The challenges are manifold, and may be met at a number of levels. Recognising the type of problem—whether it has to do with data, or information, or social or cultural issues at least helps focus debate in the right area. Forms of regulation may well be appropriate in certain contexts, and technical solutions—such as cryptography, to protect security and confidentiality—may at least mitigate some problems.

But these solutions are temporary at best, and will not substitute for a renewal of serious ethical inquiry. Paradoxically, the same postmodern context that has exacerbated these difficulties has also driven would-be ethicists to ask more radical questions. Most attempts to do a fresh, postmodern ethics are trying to grapple with the pre-social primacy of our relationships with the Other, that may speak to just the dilemmas raised by the Internet and other CITs. Such an ethic invites a dialogue between those who can see no alternative to Nietzsche and others who believe Nietzsche's fundamental error was to imagine that God is dead.

So while the struggle to define the Internet can—and should—take place on several terrains—political, educational, social—justice will not be done fully until the moral and spiritual dimensions are confronted. Because doing technology is a human activity that increasingly draws us into its processes, debating its ethics cannot fairly, or safely, be left to some supposed or self-styled experts. And because human activities are irrevocably social—they all involve 'Others'—moral approaches that start by acknowledging this are on the right track.

The Internet is not beyond ethics, even though it may pose some old questions in new ways. Surprisingly, the very postmodern context that is thought by many to be inhospitable to morality may, in its quest for an adequate mode of encountering contemporary problems of otherness, suggest some ways forward. This is, moreover, a framework to which Christian thought could make a distinctive contribution, while simultaneously being acknowledged by those who do not make any such profession. Is it too much to hope that the Internet, thought by some to hasten the relativising fragmentation of today's world, could even become a vehicle for such ethical discourse? We shall see.

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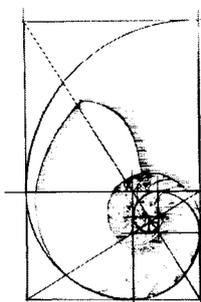
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