

Ethics of Personas, Not of People

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The things that we do online impact us just the same as the things that we do off-line do. Real harms are done to people by the wrongs done online. The wrongs done online are real in that respect. The fact that the wrongs committed online are caused by people, impress on people, and can be helped if the people so wish who take on the personas suggests that the prevention of the real wrongs done online requires real ethics, viz. ethics of people. In this paper, I argue that the seemingly straightforward suggestion is neither practical nor realistic because (1) not all values are equal, because (2) the implementation of the suggestion risks a very attractive part of what online communities have to offer, and because (3) the application of "virtual" ethics -- ethics of personas, as I'd call it -- could serve as the ethics lab so that the virtual communities enable us to further investigate about how best to conduct our lives and also to let us know more about each other.

1. The 'virtual world' is a misnomer.

It is naive to think that a hard and fast line can be drawn between the so-called virtual reality/world and the real world. Happenings in these virtual communities are *bona fide* happenings within the real world: e.g., they do not happen in hereafter.¹

The electromagnetic radiation in the range from infrared to ultraviolet, the longitudinal displacement waves that propagate through a medium, the chemical compositions of an organism's ambient medium, the pressures against skins... They excite our sensory receptors and once they are "received," our brains get to process them. The scribbles, lines, and drawings -- jumbles of pixels to be more precise -- on the computer displays excite the receptor just the same, but we seem to have developed the tendency of responding to them with immediacy after they got processed by our brains. Considering that the scribbles, etc. are but one of many sensory inputs that our brains get to encode and decode, it is rather surprising how we took an instant liking of them.

¹ Happenings in hereafter, if there were to be any, must also be the happenings of the real world. Things happen in the real world, but not in the non-real world.

On the other hand, it would have taken a literal miracle indeed for us to even take notice of the scribbles on the displays if they did not affect us.

Broadcasted moving pictures and sounds, and the transmitted noises and facsimiles over the phone lines, when we get to enjoy them, aren't literally the same as they were sent out from their origins.² By the time they arrive at our vicinities, they have already been mediated -- encoded, transmitted, and decoded -- one way or another, but they are nonetheless the genuine pieces with which we interact. Boolean binaries aren't different at all in that respect: they are just the encoded pieces that travel at the speed of optic fibers. Boolean binaries, when decoded and displayed for our enjoyment, claim equal successes in eliciting responses from us as other physical inputs do. They are all genuine items within the real world with which we conduct our businesses. However different the ways of delivery may be, these and all other forms of human interactions end with our brains' processing the raw physical data. In other words, such items as the swiftly changing imageries, noises with a certain pitches and paces, and those neatly arranged pixels are all but physical inputs, the receptions of which signal the onsets of a certain brain activities on our part.

It may be obvious, then, that those computer/IT mediated interactions are just one of many human interactions -- face to face or long distance -- and as such they are bound to have impact on human lives. Howard Rheingold writes,

"My flesh-and-blood family long ago grew accustomed to the way I sit in my home office early in the morning and late at night, chuckling and cursing sometimes crying, about words I read on the computer screen. It might have looked to my daughter as if I were alone at my desk the night she caught me chortling online, but from my point of view I was in living contact with old and new friends, strangers and colleagues" (2001, 101).

The so-called 'virtual world' is just a part of the world, and what is part of the world can't be an independent world.

2. The wrongs done online are real.

Mr. Bungle of LambdaMOO apparently left an unforgettable effects on both the virtual characters and the real-life

² If they were the same, then it must not be possible that one moving picture should be shared by many people simultaneously.

users of MOO.³ Tim the Cyberstalker obstructed a person's everyday conduct of business.⁴ Apparently they both have caused substantial harm to a part of the world. In a very general sense, in other words, they have harmed the world: whatever they did, they did it within and to the world. It doesn't follow from the fact alone, nonetheless, that the negative effects that they have left on both virtual characters and real-life users are real wrongs. On the one hand, the fact that the things we do online impress on ourselves and others doesn't by itself establish that they are fit objects of ethical evaluations. On the other hand, in both cases, it isn't clear what exactly was done. To establish that the harms done were real wrongs, one would have to know (1) who's done it (and, perhaps, what motivated the agents), (2) who were affected by the actions and to what degree, and (3) whether the things done could have been helped.

2.1 Online personas are but one of our extended persons.

Recent journal titles like "Real Wrongs in Virtual Communities" (Powers 2003) and "The Laws of the Virtual Worlds" (Lastowka and Hunter 2004) highlight the impact of our online activities on people and their lives. As mentioned in previous section, it is only naive to think that there are virtual activities of ours that will affect no one but ourselves: there are simply no such virtual activities. While we can't morph into the series of Boolean binaries, we take on personas at will to conduct our businesses online. The personas that we take on online are nothing other than the extensions of our persons.

The world abounds with personas. Iago and others of Shakespeare's, Don Quixote of Cervantes', X-men, Mr. Spock, Joey of *Friends*... They have no voices, yet they speak; they have no hearts, yet they feel; they have no intentions, yet they perform villainous, heroic, buffoon-like acts. What is even more remarkable, they all seem to have what it is to be like them. For instance, some things aren't Joey-like. They reside either deep in our fantasies or just the "next" door to us. People take on a variety of personas in real life as well.⁵ Jim the Gym teacher doesn't and perhaps shouldn't behave the same as the Jim the lover does. We sometimes find

³ See Dibbell 2001. I use the 'real-life users' to distinguish them from the personas -- the virtual characters -- that they take on online, not to imply that the virtual characters are somehow not real.

⁴ See Gilbert 2001.

⁵ Again, it is not suggested that our online lives somehow not real. Those are real in every sense of the term 'real.'

ourselves lamenting, "the girl with whom I fell in love turns out not whom I thought she was," but that is perhaps just a mixed-up feeling. Mary Ann the dating daring isn't Mary Ann the mother of two kids. Personas are the materialization of what we try to portray about ourselves or what are sometimes imposed upon us.

We keep telling ourselves who we are, and we like to tell others that. We spin our stories just as spiders spin their webs. The personas that we take on online are but one of those materialization of our portrayals. Wells of inks, the bountiful movements, noises, and the Boolean binaries are all but the tools of our choices' in telling and spreading our stories to others and ourselves. These physical raw materials help us in essentially one thing: they are the media that mediate personas and our experience of them.

2.2 The people are the online agents.

If personas are but extensions of our persons, just like Iago is an extension of the writer who told the tragic story, then it must also be accepted that personas can't help what they do themselves. Although personas are real -- in the sense that they cause us to behave, feel, react in particular ways just the same as other conventional pieces of interactions do -- they don't spin out their own stories. Iago complains about Othello and the Moor's choice of Cassio as his successor. Iago conspires with others to have it their ways. But Iago's evil "doings" can't be helped. Whatever Shakespeare has Iago do, Iago helplessly obliges. Indeed Iago as an extension of the writer's imaginative dark side of his person doesn't do anything himself. If anything qualifies as virtual in the world, this helplessly obliging nature of personas is virtual. Although they are caused by real online users and have effects on people and their lives, whatever they do, they do precisely because the story-tellers want them to do so.

On the other hand, personas themselves aren't afflicted by what other personas do to them. If what happens to Romeo and Juliet have effects on themselves, then they can't be living the days to tell their love stories to us now. The extensions of our persons -- some jumbles of the Boolean binaries if you will -- can't be affected one way or another by other jumbles of the Boolean binaries. In that way, neither Starsinger nor legba were afflicted by what Mr. Bungle of LambdaMOO did. Neither was the Professor Gilbert's online persona, appearing on the list servers, afflicted by Tim the cyberstalker's doings. It is the real-life users of the Moo, Professor Gilbert, and the readers of *Romeo and*

Juliet who are afflicted by the things that these personas do. Personas in any form, including the ones we encounter online, live on the real-life users' flesh and blood, but they can't even acknowledge others' online presence *unless* the people who spin their own stories want the personas to do just that.

It is reasonable, then, to maintain the following about the things done online. First, the real-life online users are the agents, although we loosely allow ourselves to talk as if personas do things on their own. Second, it is the real-life users who suffer from the things that are done online, even if we sometimes would like it if the things done weren't so effective in eliciting responses from us. Third, the things done in the names of personas obviously can be helped if the persons who take on the personas so wish. In short, the things done online are caused by people, impress and have effects on people, and can be helped.

2.3 Some harms done online are fit objects of ethical evaluation.

If ethics is about anything, it is about our lives and how best to conduct them. No theories of ethics qualify as legitimate unless they afford a guidance, a decision-making procedure if you will, as to how to conduct our businesses. But apparently not all businesses of ours are fit to be guided by ethics.

My liking of a certain flavor of ice-cream over other flavors is but one such businesses of mine. There are things that we can't help but do. No one defy the laws of nature. E.g., no one stay afloat unless they are supported one way or another. Those things that we can't help but do are beyond what we can ask of ourselves, and hence they aren't fit objects of our ethical evaluations. Ethicists of the two very influential yet incompatible stripes agree that no one is ethically responsible for what they can't help.^{6, 7} There might be things that just happen. It seems reasonable to think that the things with no apparent or obvious agents, viz. things that just happen if there be any such, are subsumed under the things that can't be helped. Furthermore, there might be the things that we do, which in turn affect no others and ourselves in any way. The two ethics differ on the issue of

⁶ Legal responsibility and liability are, of course, another matter.

⁷ One is the consequentialists whose prescription goes "of the alternative courses of actions, choose the course of action that will bring about the best result"; and, the other the deontologists whose guidance, in one of the three formulations of Kant, asks us to treat ourselves "always as an end, but never solely as a means." See, e.g., Mill 2001 and Kant 1981 respectively.

whether these things are fit to be judged ethically, but we need not settle the issue here. For the things done online, at least the vast majority of them, do impress and have effects on us.

The result from the previous three subsections is this. Some harms that people cause on others -- mediated through the online personas -- are real wrongs because they can be helped if the story-tellers so wish.

3. What must we do about the real wrongs done online?

We are constantly reminded that behind those personas sit real people, who are the puppeteers of the personas. It may be argued, then, those puppeteers are the only items worthy of moral evaluations for the online wrongs. The suggestion is that we hold the people, not the personas, responsible for the things done online under the pseudonyms of the personas. The suggestion correctly treats the online communities as what they really are: the online communities are real, but they are simply one of the tools of human interactions. Straight-forwardly, then, the proposal prescribes for us to hand down and enforce the verdicts from the ethics tribunals on people who "abuse" the online personas, i.e., to hold the agents responsible for the harms caused, whatever means they adopted in harming others and perhaps themselves. The proposal has even a hint of the obvious. The personas can't be held responsible for they can't help themselves as was mentioned earlier.

I'd like to argue that we must resist the temptation of extending the ethics of people for the wrongs done online, however straightforward it may seem to us and however easy it may seem for us to implement it. I claim that such an extension of peoples' ethics for the wrongs done online is neither realistic nor is it practical in what follows. For one thing, such an online anonymity is what keeps the online communities. For another, without such a freedom of the assumed personas the online communities might not survive. Furthermore, some online activities, when properly employed, may well teach us many things about the ethics of ours, i.e., ethics of people.

3.1 Not all values are equal.

Consider the following wrong done off-line, one of Peter Unger's example in his wonderfully argued *Living High and Letting Die*.

"*The Shallow Pond*. The path from the library at your

university to the humanities lecture hall passes a shallow ornamental pond. On your way to give a lecture, you notice that a small child has fallen in and is in danger of drowning. If you wade in and pull the child out, it will mean getting your clothes muddy and either canceling your lecture or delaying it until you can find something clean and dry to wear. If you pass by the child, then, while you'll give your lecture on time, the child will die straightway. You pass by and, as expected, the child dies" (1996, 9).

You had two courses of actions from which to choose: to wade in and pull the child out, or not to do so. Having a theory of ethics affords you a decision making procedure, the completion of which is an issuance of a command for you; and, you did what is asked of you accordingly. Every one of us may feel strongly about what you chose to do: you should have saved the child.⁸ But it is one thing to feel strongly about what you did and to make our feelings known, it is quite another to explain what exactly it is that you did wrong. What did you do wrong?

We may answer the question as follows. It is a fatal error of the decision procedure if it prescribes an action that every single one of us knows to be wrong. So you adopted a mistaken decision procedure. That explanation doesn't take us so far, nevertheless, because it fails to give answers to the question about the nature of the procedure's shortcoming. What exactly is lacking in (your application of) the decision-making procedure?

Indicated in Unger's shallow pond are at least two virtues: saving a helpless child and keeping one's promise (of giving lectures on time). The two virtues can't be pursued at the same time, given the details of the imagined case. In that way, the two virtues are conflicting each other. What perhaps was lacking in your decision-making procedure was, then, a way of resolving the conflicting virtues. We all think that the virtue of saving a helpless person is so drastically different from the virtue of giving lectures on time that one weighs a lot more than the other does.

Conflicting duties are common-place, as indicatives of conflicting values. We are to juggle among different duties. E.g., to refrain from lying and to help those who are in need are both our duties, yet there are occasions that both of

⁸ An adequacy requirement of the theories of ethics may be set forth in this respect that no theories of ethics allows for passing by the child ethically acceptable. In other words, we should hope for an unanimous verdict from every single theories of ethics as to which course of actions you must choose between the two alternatives.

them can't be fulfilled at the same time. We must choose one duty over the other in our attempts at doing the right thing. This implies that not all virtues, and not all duties of ours are equal in every occasion, that the details of an occasion may call for fulfillment of one duty over another, and that we must balance many values that involve specifically in determining what we must do about the wrongs done online.

3.2 Anonymity is an essential online commodity.

It isn't true that the real-life online users are anonymous in the strict sense of the term. For one thing, many online services require the users to be registered. For another, there are no internet connections that aren't registered one way or another. It is, rather, the ease with which and the degree to which one may remain anonymous that distinguishes the online anonymity from that of the garden-variety. It isn't as easy to spin a story as a person of a different gender off-line as it is online. It isn't as difficult to be found out that we are spinning a story for our personas online than it is off-line. Anonymity online is a means for an otherwise unavailable story telling of who we are and what we are like.

Anonymity online affords us to tell a story, we thought, without risking -- yet virtually risking -- the stakes. Part of the immediate attraction that we felt for the online communities was, I suppose, our naive thought that they facilitated such story telling without repercussion whatsoever. We were just naive to have thought that our online activities affected no one but us. Must we, then, dispense ourselves with the online anonymity as a means of story spinning? I shall argue that we must resist the temptation.

First, by far the personas that we take on online are the most malleable ones, compared to the ones we take on off-line. And as a result, if anonymity were to be rid of from our online activities, a significant part of our ability to tell our stories will be compromised. We will have to watch out for the repercussion on ourselves rather than that on the personas which can't be afflicted by whatsoever things done to them. Second, anonymity as a tool for the story telling is all the more important now because the Internet and the online communities are increasingly dominated by powerful corporations and governments. Once the ease with which we assume our online personas is lost, and once the degree to which we are guaranteed as anonymous become shallow, there is no telling in what the imbalance of power between such entities and individuals will result. Apparently it seems

reasonable to expect the result that as individuals it will become more difficult for us to say what we feel, read what we want, and do as we please. Third, as a simple matter of economics, if the online activities were to be compromised as just mentioned, then the online communities perhaps would not survive as what they are now, leaving the online communities as just the place for business meetings and no place for human creativity.

It is reasonable to maintain, then, anonymity as a tool for telling our stories is an essential commodity for an effective and creative online experience of ours. On the other hand, deliberating an ethics for the personas will merit us in furthering our inquiries about how best to conduct our lives and in allowing us to find out the things about each other that are otherwise unavailable. The online communities can facilitate the ethics labs for all of us. The online communities can be the testing facilities of ethics. The use of the online communities as the testing "facilities" where our intuitions about the right thing to do get tested, without repercussion of holding the minority views *requires* that the view-holder be anonymous. So far, nonetheless, it wasn't explicitly mentioned why an application of ethics for people compromises the anonymity tool. Here is the reason why.

If an application of ethics results in anything -- we behaving in a particular way toward each other, perhaps -- it is because there are some things that we want others to do (or to not do) for us; and, it is also because we make our wishes known for others to oblige. The tools of ethics are basically praise and blame, however ineffective they could be compared to the legally binding requests. A funny thing about our off-line world is that it enforces the wishes of not-so-explicitly-known majority; another is that it sets a certain restrictions on how to properly demand from others. Indeed our society puts a stringent requirement as to which demand can be considered as legitimate. As a result, the expressed wishes or demands are always made by *someone*, and that someone risks being judged by simply making the demand which is deemed e.g., esoteric. In other words, just as the ethics of ours determines and so guides us in what to do, the ethics of people also keeps us from demanding a certain things in a specified/shared ways. Similarly, our ethics doesn't only demand that the right things be done, but it also specifies a certain acceptable ways of doing the right things. E.g., stealing from your rich friends to help those in need isn't a typically recommended way of doing the right thing.

The real-life online users are not only governed by the societal, legal, and moral norms, but also restricted to voice their wishes in a particular way by the norms off-line as well. Lifting of a certain societal restrictions on how precisely to make such a demand on others and ourselves is precisely what the online communities will afford us; and, the online communities -- when not compromised by an attempted application of people's ethics -- will be the place to gather what are being asked of us by others, to discuss the merits of the demands, and to determine whether we should oblige. The online communities, in other words, will serve as the meeting places where our demands explicitly "meet" up with the real world audiences. If we were to try applying the ethics of people, the meeting place that is made of Boolean binaries would become indistinguishable from the place like our school yards where voicing up is also governed by the rules of the school, the community, the local, and so on.

4. Ethics of personas

The virtue of having people behaving online ethically and the virtue of people freely spinning their stories online, I'd like to argue, are not contradictory to each other. The two virtues can be satisfied if we were to adopt an ethics of personas for our online communities. Instead of extending the ethics for people to the online communities -- which presupposes that we be able to pass praise and blame directly to the online users -- the ethics of personas will hold personas responsible for the wrong and the good that they "do." I shall argue that the adoption of ethics for personas is a plausible solution that will let us maintain the ethical online behaviors without jettisoning the anonymity tool for freely spinning our stories.

How should we implement the ethics of personas? Or, fundamental still, what exactly is the ethics of personas? The idea is that we treat the online personas *as if* they are the real agents. This is what we do when we blame Iago and his conspirators for the tragedy. We sympathize with Romeo and Juliet. And so on. Just as our online personas go proxy on our persons as the extensions, they also go proxy for our ethical responsibilities.

One may wonder if the proposal of treating personas as if they are agents on their own violates an important principle of ethics, "'Ought' to implies 'can.'" Our personas can't help what they do apparently. By holding them responsible, it may be argued, aren't we allowing the cases of helpless yet ethically responsible agents? It must be noted,

neverthelss, that the ethics of personas doesn't acknowledge the online personas to be the genuine agents. It instead treats as if they are the agents. So there allowed no cases of helpless yet ethically responsible agents: the personas appear to be and treated as if the agents but they aren't.

One may also wonder, of a practical nature, if we hold the personas and only the personas responsible for the real wrongs done by people, won't that even encourage people to behave badly? In other words, it may be argued, the ethics of personas will have no binding force for the people behind them because with anonymity there will be no identifiable and punishable puppeteers. In response, I shall point out that the personas are more personable than the objection seems to assume. For instance, it takes time, effort and of course resources to build an online persona. Surely, we may take on one persona one day and another on other days. E.g., Mr. Bungle after his own "death" by JoeFeedback's elimination came back as Dr. Jest. Does this show that the real-life user of the two personas is encouraged to act again as Mr. Bungle did as he assumes another persona, Dr. Jest? We musn't take personas to lightly. After all, it is the persona of what a good captain of a ship must be that keeps some ship-captains prepared give their own lives if their ships meet up with fatal destiny.

The result of adopting the ethics of personas for the wrongs done online, then, is two-fold. On the one hand, by holding personas ethically resonsible for what they do, we maintain the anonymous nature of online participations. On the other hand, because the personas' reputations are so personable that keeping them in terms for others will motivate the real-life users behind the personas to act ethically. What ethics to implement will be left either for the personas to decide, or for the technology providers to decide. E.g., some online gaming communities adopt and implemented a very specific rules against "griefers." Although a specific adoption of a certain moral codes aren't as good an idea as to let the online communities decide for their own, I suppose it will help and let the real-user know what they are expected of by participating online.

5. Concluding remarks

In this paper, I argued that (1) the online communities are but one type of human communities, (2) the wrongs done online are real, (3) we must resist the temptation of extending the ethics of people for the wrongs done online because it will compromise an essential commodity of being anonymous, and lastly (4) by treating the online personas as if they are

agents, we may satisfy the virtue of having people online act ethically and the virtue of letting them freely spin their own stories without repercussion of telling the story. Such freedom will afford us an explicit chance of taking our ethics from the arm-chairs of philosophers' and put it in an active investigation by people.

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