ETHICS & EVIL IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Media, Universal Values & Global Development

Essays in honor of Clifford G. Christians

edited by

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iTHOU

Ethics, Friendship, and the Internet

Steve Jones and Ishani Mukherjee

Although it is now practically lost in the mists of (Internet) time, the most iconic visual image of the Internet in the 1990s was that of the *New Yorker* magazine cartoon that showed a dog seated before a computer screen and keyboard explaining to another dog, "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog" (Steiner, 1993). Copies of the cartoon still abound online, but few people make reference to it anymore. Chances are that most people who use the term *Web 2.0* would not know what you were talking about if you asked them whether they remembered "that *New Yorker* cartoon about the Internet, the one with the dogs." Popular culture has passed the image by, but the issue that is central to understanding the cartoon's humor, just who is communicating with us online, is still vital. In this chapter, we explore ideas of awareness and dialog online. In short, the question at the heart of Martin Buber's (1958/1970) formulation of *I and Thou*, "How do we know a 'thou' exists?", lies at the heart of the Internet mythos. How we choose to treat relationships on the Internet, and those with whom we communicate online, gives expression to our relation with the world.

INFORMATION OVERLOAD, INTERACTION OVERLOAD

In an article calling for examination of the proposition that democracy is undergirded by an informed citizenry, Cliff Christians (1976) peeled back the layers of assumptions surrounding the notion that "democratic societies

characteristically presuppose information as their lifeline" (p. 1). Although his article focused on mass-mediated forms of news, now, more than 30 years later, thanks to the proliferation of new communication technologies such as the Internet and digital broadcasting, there is more information available to most people than ever before. At the same time, since the increasingly widespread use of the Internet, and particularly since the rise of Web 2.0 technologies and social networking services such as MySpace and Facebook, there are more people available to people (and more immediately) than ever before. To put that another way, never before has it been so easy for so many people to reach so many other people at once.

Christians (1976), through the work of Jacques Ellul, has noted that "the unrelenting flow of news inebriates human memory" leads to an "evaporation (and) consequent weakening of (the) political order by driving events into oblivion, that is, actively forgetting for the sake of maintaining sanity" (p. 12). How long before the notion of *information overload* (a once-popular term that now seems almost quaint given that it was coined before the Internet's ascent) becomes redeployed by those seeking respite not from information but from others, from online social connections? How long, in other words, before *interaction overload*? Might it be that an unrelenting flow of social ties inebriates humanity? Anyone who has used social networking sites knows that there can certainly be an unrelenting flow of "friend requests" and information about one's friends on the sites.

Quantity and quality are not isolated from one another. As Ellul (1964) noted with regard to Engel's Law, a fundamental building block of Ellul's notion of *la technique*, at some point in the development of a city, there is a passage of quantity into quality—that is, a city of 10,000 people is qualitatively different than the one it will be when it holds 100,000 or 1 million people. One can easily see the obvious connection to online communities: The Internet of 1,000,000 people in the 1980s is qualitatively different than the Internet of hundreds of millions of people of today, and the Facebook of 1,000 people at a time when its users were only students and faculty at Harvard University is different than the Facebook of tens of millions of people of today for no other reason than that there are more people.

But there are other reasons for the difference. It is not only the quantity of friends that makes social networking a phenomenon, unlike past means of befriending others. To become someone's friend on Facebook or MySpace is qualitatively different than to be someone's friend in real life. The ease with which one can make friends and connect (and disconnect) with them should give us pause when considering its nature. Several scholars have characterized online social connectedness in terms of the strength of ties among people (Boase, Horrigan, & Rainie, 2006; Granovetter, 1973; Kavanaugh & Patterson, 2001; Kavanaugh, Reese, Carroll, & Rosson, 2003; Lin, 2001; Oldenburg, 1997; R. Putnam, 2000). Their research foregrounds the complicated notion of friendship: In general, we have degrees of friend-

ship and connectedness; rarely is one's relationship to another an entirely all-or-nothing proposition. But even with that acknowledgment, the nature of friendship in the time of the Internet is further complicated. The tone of the complexity is perhaps best experienced simply by writing a sentence such as, "To become a friend of someone on Facebook is qualitatively different than to be someone's friend in real life," which requires having to grapple with whether to put quotation marks around the words *friend* and *real life*. The definition of *friendship* has recently been undergoing change due to social networking. The notion of real life has been increasingly complicated by the online lives that many people are now leading, lives often no less real than real lives. That we still do not have a vocabulary with which to simply and adequately discuss the distinctions between communication that is mediated by technology and communication that is not mediated by technology at the least tells that we are still in the early stages of our experience with these different modes of interaction and with the types of relationships in which we are engaged through those modes.

To some extent, the simplest terms to use to make these distinctions are *real* and *virtual*. Of course, both terms are loaded, both with popular and scholarly discourse, ideas and values, but for purposes of this chapter, we continue to use these terms. We do not mean to oppose these terms, nor do we intend to posit a spectrum on which each term is at an opposite end with many gradations between them. Rather, we use them in entirely descriptive ways to denote distinct experiences of interaction and of the contexts within which that interaction occurs.

REAL AND VIRTUAL, FACE-TO-FACE, AND COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

The most important reason to use the terms as we do is that debates about friendship and relationships in real and virtual environments generally come down to whether computer-mediated communication (CMC) can be as meaningful and satisfying a means of interacting with others as face-to-face communication. The most common critique of CMC, one well argued by Dreyfus (2001), is that it is not as real as face-to-face communication. It does not provide means of real interaction and real commitment by comparison with face-to-face communication. The most common defense of CMC, one clearly put forth by Castells (2001), is that virtual environments are sufficiently different than real ones, such that the comparison of CMC to face-to-face communication is unfair.

In general, face-to-face communication is held up "as a kind of gold standard" against which other types of communication are measured (Berger, 2005). CMC is most often discounted for its lack of nonverbal com-

municative artifacts and absence of physical embodiment. Michael Schudson (1978) has noted that face-to-face communication has long been perceived as the ideal mode of communication:

> When we criticize the reality of the mass media, we do so by opposing it to an ideal of conversation which we are not inclined to examine. We are not really interested in what face-to-face communication is like; rather, we have developed a notion that all communication *should* be like a certain model of conversation, whether that model really exists or not. (p. 323; italics added)

The idealization of face-to-face communication has meant that it has not been subject to the same (or even similar) kinds of critical analysis to which CMC has been put. More to the point for our purposes, CMC has not been analyzed for the possibilities by which symbolically rich meanings are created.

The scholarly debate between face-to-face and CMC has long involved two camps of scholars, divided in orientation toward either of the two approaches. Few have tried to bridge the gap in order to create a balance between the physical (bodied) and technological (disembodied) forms of communication. Heidegger (1977), Ivan Illich (1973), and, more recently, Dreyfus (2001) explore the teleological roles of technology, criticizing it in favor of face-to-face human communication. These scholars primarily use rich instances from linguistics and academia as examples of the ways in which technology relegates language use and distance education to the realm of mechanical action. On the opposite camp, McLuhan (1965), Carey (1989), and Castells (2001) admit that technology is something we are culturally a part of, in the way that human communication and participation in networking technologies can create a community of shared realities. According to these communication theorists, technologically mediated communication is as satisfying and as much central to civic life as is face-to-face communication. Although they do not discount the organic relevance of physically mediated communication, they do contend that interactions through CMC "shape the self and the mind rather than merely serve as instruments of action" (Munson & Warren, 1997, p. 316).

DREYFUS' EXISTENTIALISM: DISEMBODYING CMC, EMBODYING FACE TO FACE

In his treatise *On the Internet*, Hubert L. Dreyfus (2001) introduces a pragmatic philosophy to argue whether the Internet can create a close community through distance education. His unique contribution to the philosophy of

CMC is a modern existential approach that attempts to explore technology's inherent instrumentality by comparing it to the embodied and spatially defined face-to-face environment. Dreyfus, like Heidegger, is also concerned with the *essence of technology* and concludes that "the Internet deprives users of essential embodied human capacities such as trust, and involvement in shared local concerns. . . . (And) that 'interactive' education leaves out the shared moods and risks that make learning possible" (Dreyfus, 2001, p. 1).

In order to criticize CMC, Dreyfus (2001) draws on an array of philosophies, from Plato's denial of embodiment and Nietzsche's celebration of the human body to Kierkegaard's critique of the Press and reprimand of the detached and irresponsible public sphere. Dreyfus argues that CMC discounts the physicality of face-to-face communication but also has the capacity to corrupt and distort the traditionally accepted forms of communication and education that face-to-face interaction celebrates. Although he admits to the importance of CMC as a mode of linear message transmittal, "connecting to as wide a web of information as possible" through hyperlinks, he denies it any sort of relevance or meaning, the two qualities that are quintessential to face-to-face communication, an act that results in a process of "collecting what is significant" (Dreyfus, 2001, p. 11). CMC may allow its participants equal access to information and increased user control over message reception and dissemination, but what it takes away from interpersonal interactions is embodied presence and a sense of mutual commitment. From this perspective, Dreyfus argues that face-to-face communication is far superior to CMC because it privileges emotional involvement and encourages obligatory commitments between the participants. Dreyfus also argues in favor of face-to-face communication when he points out the shortcomings of artificial intelligence (AI) technology by saying that machines are incapable of duplicating patterns of human judgment and common sense and can only go so far as creating simulations of embodied experiences. Although these *body-like* simulations give users the opportunity to traverse cyberspace, a limitless virtual realm beyond the body as Plato would have defined it, Dreyfus, like Nietzsche, believes in the reality of "the emotional and intuitive capacities" of face-to-face involvement (Dreyfus, 2001, pp. 5–6).

The essence of the debate that Dreyfus puts forth is that interacting face to face is a primary condition for the exchange of knowledge. He compares traditional and distance learning through the Internet to delineate the importance of apprenticeship and practical imitation that is only possible in face-to-face communication. Further, according to Dreyfus (2001), the act of mastering the skills for teaching and learning are not possible "without involvement and presence" (p. 7). Dreyfus agrees that as long as students are consumers of information in the absolute initial stages of learning, distance education via CMC is an adequate mode of correspondence. In his view, "distance learning will produce only competence, while expertise and practical wisdom will remain completely out of reach" (Dreyfus, 2001, p. 49)

compared with face-to-face learning. Dreyfus refers to the importance of having teachers who are not only experts in a particular field such as music or medicine but who can provide guidance to students who will learn practical wisdom by imitating their mentor's skills. According to Dreyfus, sharing physical presence and interacting with others through language is an imperative function of learning. He compares distance learning through CMC to an endless library of documents that are available at random to information-seekers. Although students may obtain competence to traverse through the hypertextual maze of resources, there are no teachers online who can guide them to acquire proficiency, expertise, mastery, and practical wisdom in their learning skills. Distance learning, argues Dreyfus, reduces an individual's capacity to interpret nonverbal and nontextual cues by discounting the notions of judgment, meaning, relevance, and risk-taking in real-world contexts.

This disembodied involvement with the Internet raises serious concerns regarding the body as a concrete site of sociophysical interaction through which reality is created and sustained. Mediating presence though CMC, or telepresence, according to Dreyfus (2001), leads to "the loss of a sense of the reality of people and things" (p. 7). In the debate between CMC, which creates a "disembodied detached spectator," and face-to-face communication, which makes an "involved embodied agent," Dreyfus opts for the latter. Dreyfus points out that the alienation of background context and physical attunement in CMC leads to a loss of trust, reality, and embodied presence. Using Merleau-Ponty's (1945/1962) philosophy of embodied readiness, Dreyfus concludes in favor of face-to-face learning, writing that, "apprenticeship can only take place in the shared situations of the home, the hospital, the playing field, the laboratory and the production sites of crafts. Distance-apprenticeship is an oxymoron" (pp. 68–69).

Dreyfus (2001) discounts the process of hyperlearning through CMC, which encourages anonymity, irresponsibility, curiosity, and a lack of commitment. He compares CMC to Kierkegaard's (1940/1962) critique of the press, warning society, "There is no way to salvage the public sphere since, unlike concrete and committed groups, it was from the start the source of leveling" (p. 76). Dreyfus appropriates Kierkegaard's aesthetic and ethical spheres to life on the Internet, arguing that these first two stages of existence can apply to CMC so far as individuals make virtual commitments and abide by them. However, Kierkegaard's final religious stage, which instills meaning into reality, is what Dreyfus feels is most lacking in CMC. I return to this point later.

In a nutshell, CMC undermines unconditional commitments, according to the philosopher, and it trades identity for anonymity, real for virtual, meaning for arbitrariness, presence for absence, and embodiment for telepresence.

CASTELLS' GALAXY: THE CULTURE OF CMC

In the *Internet Galaxy*, Manuel Castells (2001) characterizes the widespread ideology of freedom attributed to the Internet by delineating its four-layered cultural structure: the technomeritocratic culture, the hacker culture, the virtual communitarian culture, and the entrepreneurial culture. According to Castells, the cultural interactions that occur through CMC follow similar behavioral values and norms that apply to a face-to-face socializing environment. From this perspective, Castells argues that social interactions through technological systems are as much culturally constructed as are embodied interactions. In a sense, by emphasizing the technological development of the open source code system that allows anyone to control and modify information on the Internet, Castells counteracts the popular view that judgment, meaning, and relevance are lost through CMC. Just as interactions in a face-to-face network are culturally defined and based on mutual cooperation, the use of open source software for CMC is "based on cooperation and the free circulation of technical knowledge . . . (and) is culturally determined" (Castells, 2001, p. 38). Arguing for CMC, Castells resituates the face-to-face interactive notion of *social presence* within online networking by stating that CMC allows the same kind of "selective social interaction and symbolic belonging" that a physically mediated network would allow (Castells, 2001, p. 37).

Supporters of face-to-face communication, as well as "critics of the Internet, and media reports, sometimes relying on studies by academic researchers, argue that the spread of the Internet is leading to social isolation, to a breakdown of social communication and family-life, as faceless individuals practice random sociability, while abandoning face-to-face interaction in real settings" (Castells, 2001, p. 116). Castells succinctly summarizes the philosophical dilemma surrounding the nature and culture of CMC and offers networked individualism as an alternative way to approach the debate. Based on previous empirical evidence, Castells shows that life on the Internet does not undermine civic participation but rather enhances it. According to Castells, one has to step away from the face-to-face perspective in order to study it in terms of changing contexts of sociability and redefine it to denote a network of organized social interactions. In addition, the redefining of social networking warrants a revaluation of the notions of embodiment and a lack of it. In the current economic infrastructure, social relationships are centered on the individual. This individuation of society and the resultant mechanization of representation cause people to distance themselves from the public sphere, resulting in what Castells calls the growth of networked individualism. Embodiment has become a privilege and face-to-face communication a scarcity in the postindustrial society, where people are gradually adopting newer forms of family, friendship, and social circles. Thus, in the

present socioeconomic context, where face-to-face communication between strong ties is largely reduced due to spatiotemporal constraints, the scope for weak ties to form networks through CMC is ideal. These weak ties are not isolated individuals but rather a community of like-minded people who create social patterns of networking through CMC at a time when face-to-face interactions are becoming perceived as potentially alienating phenomenon. Hence, physical embodiment is no longer a necessity for social networking because weak ties or online acquaintances "rarely build lasting, personal relationships . . . and do not necessarily reveal their identity" (Castells, 2001, p. 129), making telepresence an acceptable and, in some cases, perhaps desirable form of communication. Moreover, as Castells points out, the questions of commitment and a lack of anonymity, which are imperative to face-to-face communication, become irrelevant in the context of networked individualism, which encourages "'specialized communities';. . . (or) forms of sociability constructed around specific interests" (Castells, 2001, p. 132), as do MySpace, Facebook, and Orkut, among other online social networking sites (and as did e-mail lists, MUDs, MOOs, and other online media before those).

Castells (2001) provides an alternative approach to address concerns about CMC eroding the sense of geography and reducing practical skills through teleworking and distance learning. Using empirical evidence about the functions and availability of Internet services in urban centers the world over, Castells counterargues that telecommuting, telemarketing, or teleworking in general, for work or education, increase the need for physical transportation and geographic mobility (Kling, 2002). Garnering information through CMC does not eliminate the need for learning practical wisdom but rather creates the groundwork for future physical apprenticeship by offering multiple configurations of work and educational opportunities. Of course, one must also consider the nature of work in question because it is becoming clear that certain types of work, such as collaborative writing, may be enhanced through the use of online tools such as wikis.

In his persuasive argument for CMC, Castells (2001) does not devalue or replace the need for face-to-face communication. Rather, he regards CMC as a popular form of social communication technology that has as much of a cultural hold over human interactions, embodied or disembodied, as humans do in controlling technology and sustaining their face-to-face interactions. According to him, the "individualization of working arrangements, the multi-location of the activity, and the ability to network all these individual activities around the individual worker, usher in a new urban space, the space of endless mobility, a space made of flows of information and communication, ultimately managed with the Internet" (Castells, 2001, p. 234). To deny the existence of this technocultural space mediated by its supporting hybrid mechanisms is to deny the existence of the world we live in and its physical and technological realities.

CONCLUSION

Despite his well-argued entreaties for an understanding of CMC as a mode of human communication unfairly compared with face-to-face communication, and his discussion of ethics in information societies (which tends toward primary consideration of the uses to which information is put and secondary consideration of human interaction), Castells (2001) nevertheless does not sufficiently address what we believe is the most significant issue regarding online communication—namely, whether and in what ways online relationships may be fully dialogic. This is not to say that online relationships may be more or less real than ones not online but rather to inquire as to whether CMC is in any way contextually more or less promising as a mode of communication or, perhaps more important, as a sensibility that is centered on human dignity. Martin Buber (1958/1970) clearly described how I–thou relationships are always at risk of becoming I–it relationships. It is not difficult to construct an argument that the element of risk-taking that Dreyfus notes is absent in CMC would decrease the human commitment to dialog that is at the core of an I–thou relationship. Castells' ideas about CMC are no easier as a means by which to argue that CMC can well support dialogic relationships, focused as they are on the place of the individual within society and not on interaction.

What are the prospects for dialog and responsibility in an Internet age? An important first step is to acknowledge that CMC and face-to-face communication not only are not opposites but also are not in competition and may be mutually beneficial and reinforcing. For the many people in developed countries who have Internet access, it is unlikely that CMC and face-to-face communication are seen as separate relational modes. Rather, they are probably considered different means supporting the same end—namely, creating and maintaining relationships.

A good first step, then, is to begin to understand the dimensions of interaction in and between real and virtual environments. Most research typically isolates communication within one or the other realm. But in what ways are connections made between them and with what consequences? For an illustration on a mundane level, consider that some scholars have argued that making friends on social networking sites is influenced by peer pressure and social networks offline, noting that some people may "prefer to accept Friendships with someone they barely know rather than going through the socially awkward process of rejecting them . . . while others hope that Friending a celebrity will make them look cool" (Boyd, 2006, para. 25).

That is not to say that all virtual relationships must have real analogues (or vice versa) but rather that virtual and real relationships are together part of one's larger social circle. This statement is true, at the very least, in terms of the time one has to allot to relationships in a given day. Decisions to attend

to relationships in virtual and real environments have consequences for each: The more relationships in virtual environments one has and to which one pays attention, the less time and attention can be given to relationships in real environments. Even when the relationship in question is with the same person, the means by which one pays attention to it tells each participant something. The medium can also be a (if not *the*) message: Shall I find time and make the effort to see you face to face or via CMC? Perhaps you are not able to travel for face-to-face communication, and CMC is "the next best thing to being there," as the old advertising slogan goes. Such decisions play a part in any relationship because we interpret how others attend to us as a message about the value they may place on the relationship, among other things.

In a recent study of MySpace pages, it was found that the average number of friends per MySpace user was 145, with some users having no friends while others have more than 1,000 (Jones, Goyez, Millermaier, & Schuler, n.d.). What does it mean to have hundreds or thousands of connections on these sites? Does Engel's Law apply? Despite knowing some things about the number of friends and about how people link to one another on social networking sites (Boyd, 2006), we still do not know much about how they interact or about what these links, these people, mean to one another. We have long judged people by learning who their friends are, and social networking sites capitalize on this notion. Our circle of friends tells something about us—about who we are in relation to them. But in this case, the adding (or subtracting) of friends is more easily done, more quickly done, and done over greater distances without the need for travel. We can grasp how the quantity of social relationships has changed, but we do not yet understand what the qualitative dimensions are of these relationships.

Paul Tillich (1954b) argued in a lecture, "The Spiritual Situation in Our Technical Society," that cultural interpretation of "determining structures and decisive trends" shows we are living in an "industrially determined society . . . a world of tools above the given world" (p. 3). Friendship on online social networking sites is framed in an industrially organized manner (in some cases, more obviously so, such as LinkedIn [2007], whose "mission is to help you be more effective in your daily work and open doors to opportunities using the professional relationships you already have"). From this view, social networking becomes the complete realization of the adage that "It's not what you know, it's who you know." Much as information, what you know, can be hyperlinked thanks to HyperText Markup Language (HTML), so too can friendship become hyperlinked. We can "request" friends and "connect" with others much as we can request data and connect to a website.

It is difficult to assess how much social networking serves instrumental purposes and how much it serves social purposes. In terms of the former, there is a clear fit within Kierkegaard's aesthetic existential stage as a self-serving and escapist activity. In terms of the latter, there is a fit within

Kierkegaard's ethical stage, in which commitment and responsibility are foregrounded. But these are not mutually exclusive purposes, of course. One common reason for friendship is support—friends can do one "a favor," and that favor can be returned. Sometimes requests for favors are measured and weighed, and if one finds more requests for favors than anything else, the nature of the friendship changes, but it is not usually an all-or-nothing proposition. The more interesting matter is the "else," the types of support one may find among friends that are not instrumental, that are in the realm of Kierkegaard's ethical stage. For what reasons other than "favors" do we create and maintain friendships, virtual and real?

An answer to that question is well beyond the scope of this chapter. However, we should continue to question the changing nature of friendship in the Internet age. Tillich (1954) noted that the industrial organization of humankind for purposes of unspecified means adapted to "patterns of production and consumption" (p. 7) and without a sense of ultimate ends leads to an experience of emptiness. A means by which to alleviate emptiness is through relationships and friends. But if the acquisition of friends is industrially organized, how well will it alleviate emptiness? We would agree with Dreyfus that Kierkegaard's final religious stage is lacking in CMC. What are the means by which we may experience commitment and responsibility? What are the means by which we may engage in I–thou relationships in virtual environments? Indeed, to what extent do virtual environments provide for dialogic relationships?

To answer such questions, we must develop, in line with Christians' (2002) admonition to "(call) back the language from its technological metaphors" (p. 47), a vocabulary that will help us to manage the linguistic turns involved in denoting the virtual and the real and that will help us to understand how those may be blended. How do we talk about virtual environments, ones in which we are fully immersed, for instance, with others with whom we have no contact in real environments? With what words do we describe the relations between virtual and real environments? Richard Rorty (1996) has noted that common sense has its own lexicon that is coded into our language and media. In much of the literature on virtual environments, the solution to the linguistic dilemma has been to turn to the term *presence* and denote virtual presence as telepresence (Biocca & Levy, 1995; Boyer, 1996; Hayles, 1999; Heim, 1993, 1998). Another effort, by Matthew Lombard and Teresa Ditton (1997), contrasts social realism with perceptual realism: Social realism is "the extent to which a media portrayal is plausible or 'true to life' in that it reflects events that do or could occur in the non-mediated world," whereas perceptual realism is "the degree to which a medium can produce seemingly accurate representations of objects, events, and people—representations that look, sound, and/or feel like the 'real' thing."

None of these is particularly satisfying, however, because none is rooted in the person but rather in the person in the environment. In her disser-

tation, Terri Senft (2003) contrasts sensory immersion and psychological immersion, the former denoting engagement of the senses (the person in the environment) and the latter denoting "the feeling of psychic investment . . . that end-users have with telepresence technologies" (p. 31). Senft wants:

> to shift the focus of current debates about telepresence from epistemology to something else. Right now, far too many people wonder "How do I know this (camgirl, community, psychic engagement) is true?" What I propose is a move to a question more like, "Given the fact that I am emotionally invested in this (camgirl, community, aesthetic) what is my personal responsibility as a (camgirl, viewer, researcher)?" I call this a shift from telepistomology to tele-ethics. (p. 31)

The shift that Senft identifies is apparent in Ken Goldberg's (2000) collection of essays titled "The Robot in the Garden" (a play on the title of Leo Marx's [1964] book "The Machine in the Garden"). Although Goldberg's and the other contributors' concerns are primarily about telerobotics (TR) and art and only secondarily about virtual reality (VR) (because, as Goldberg says, "VR is simulacral, TR is distal," p. 5), the discussions of authenticity and representation are germane to discussions of virtual and real friendship. In virtual environments, the reality of the environment will always be in question because, although we can be present elsewhere, "knowledge is inextricably bound to the place of our immediate and proximal engagement with things" (Malpas, 2000, p. 124).

For it to be any other way requires the suspension of disbelief, an action with which we are intimately familiar but have almost entirely left untheorized in the literature on media generally and virtual environments specifically. In virtual environments, suspension of disbelief is anticipated as part of the design of hardware and software, environments and interactions, but in the literature about it there is far too little consideration of it. Fauconnier and Turner (2002), writing about "the construction of the unreal," assert that:

> We live directly in (conceptual) blends: We manipulate these elaborate networks with no conscious attention to the topologies and projections across the network. Our attention is focused on running the blend itself and attending to the relevant material anchors. Although it took us a long time to master the complex blends linked to a cultural activity like writing, once we have them, we have the greatest difficulty escaping them even when we want to. (p. 389)

We have not yet mastered the complex blends of friendship in virtual environments such as social networking sites. As Judith Donath (2000) has pointed out, "as the virtual world grows to encompass all aspects of our lives . . . the quality of being real, which is accepted and assumed with little

thought in the physical world, becomes one of the central questions of society" (p. 311). As we proliferate friendship through our engagements in virtual environments, it is not only the "thou" in Buber's (1958/1970) I–thou relationship that is at stake, it is also the "I." The maintenance of multiple personas in virtual environments, of multiple avatars that represent us, will further complicate matters. Choosing which "I" will interact with a thou is an odd exercise. Although we agree with Castells that the nature of friendship in CMC may be quite distinct from that in face-to-face communication, it is important to explore the nature of commitment and responsibility as foundations for human relationships in virtual environments. The sooner we do so, the closer we will be to understanding the ethical dimensions, demands, and consequences of the suspension of disbelief as these are coded into these new technologies of perception, interaction, and communication, and the sooner we will find ways to promote and benefit from the humanness of our connections.