

**THE ETHICAL DIMENSIONS OF A NEW MEDIA AGE:  
A STUDY IN CONTEMPORARY RESPONSIBILITY**

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## **Abstract**

Existing theoretical literature on new media predominantly focuses upon political issues. Whilst this is merited it is at the expense of ethical theoretical understandings of the social milieu we inhabit. As our environment becomes suffused with new media and is in turn shaped by them we require contributions that would seek to understand the impact this has on moral responsibility and moral action. The doctoral research collected here is motivated by the idea that ethical theory must be challenged and updated by developments in society lest we lack the resources to understand contemporary moral life. As such, the approach taken is to produce a work of ethical theory that is informed by observation of the empirical conditions of life in a new media age. The case studies explored within are not unknown to existing literature but the ethical significance of them has yet to be sufficiently articulated. So through research into avatar interaction, media events, networked urban spaces, online architectures, and surveillant softwares, I will outline an empirically driven ethical theory of how moral responsibility and moral action operate within online environments and within environments of ubiquitous new media. This involves, at the same time, critically examining these developments in order to present moral problems that existing ethical theories – written without consideration of such technological advances – would omit. This survey of contemporary moral responsibility, of how responsibility is initiated and responded to, represents an original contribution to an understanding of ethics in a new media age.

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## **Author's Declaration**

This is to certify that I am responsible for the work submitted in this thesis, that the original work is my own, and that neither the thesis nor the original work contained therein has been submitted to this or any other institution for a higher degree.

A version of Chapter Six has been published in the journal *Mobilities* and a version of Chapter Eight has been published in the edited book *Internet and Surveillance: The Challenge of Web 2.0 and Social Media*:

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## 1. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

*Hospital update. Shots still being fired. Also Metro cinema next door.*

– Tweet

*Mummy, tell the police they must be quick. People are dying here!*

– Text Message

*Doesn't matter if the police arrive cos we'll chase dem out because as you've seen on the news, they are NOT ON DIS TING. Everyone meet at 7 at stratford park and let's get rich.*

– BBM Broadcast Message

Emile Durkheim once observed that ‘morality is the indispensable minimum, that which is strictly necessary, the daily bread without which societies cannot live’ (1997: 13). He conceptualised morality in terms of sociality, a form of solidarity between people. This solidarity was a voluntary bond – taking the form ‘I *ought* to do xyz for such-and-such a person’ – and so it was organic and spontaneous rather than forced. For Durkheim, morality was an object of study for the sociologist, since they could study the relative strength of the solidarity between people or, in studying new social developments, could uncover the effects they have on it. In what reads like a turf-war with moral philosophers he complains that ‘too often moralists have lacked any objective criterion by which to distinguish moral facts from those that are not’ (ibid: 14). Of course, we need not be so territorial: meta-ethics, normative ethics, applied ethics – the kinds of moral thought that are ascendant in the discipline of philosophy – are valuable; but what we can say is that there is a role to be played here by the social theorist. What is the state of the moral bond that pertains between people and how do social conditions impact upon it? If we are to say that a moral bond is a voluntarily entered into relationship with another person, something that one ought to do, then approaching such a question would constitute a study of responsibility. This brings us back more faithfully to the root of the word ethics: *ethos* or character. Character can refer to a certain disposition or way of being-in-the-world and it can also, in the old-fashioned sense, refer to moral fortitude, to the way that a given person understands her

responsibilities. If normative or applied ethics are about what is good or bad – how to make moral decisions (normative) or what to do in a given scenario or context (applied) – then the kind of ethical inquiries that the social theorist can endeavour to make are those towards an understanding of (1) our dispositions towards responsibility and (2) the ways in which a given environment impacts upon our ability to act on that responsibility (or, in other words, discovering moral problems). Such an approach as a whole is best understood as a survey of the ethical dimensions of society – and, to date, it is best articulated in the work of Zygmunt Bauman.

In his *Postmodern Ethics* (2009), Bauman demonstrated that social change can foreclose the applicability of some ethical theories – or at least make their application less desirable or commonsensical – whilst at the same time recommending others. For Bauman, writing in the 1990s, it was obvious that traditional ethical theories no longer spoke to a society that was suspicious of tradition, incredulous of metanarratives, and pervasively uncertain. Bauman was not convinced, however, that this would mean a decline in morality but rather that new opportunities presented themselves. As previous ethical theories came to offer only a ‘blind alley’, as universal and objective ethical theory became untenable, ‘the possibility of a radically novel understanding of moral phenomena’ emerged (ibid: 2). For Bauman, this consisted of being able to cast off all the ‘illusions’ surrounding moral injunctions (ibid: 32), the sophistry and thinly disguised conservatism and power relations, without, hopefully, losing moral practice along with it. Bauman was optimistic that postmodernity was an opportunity to be taken for a poststructuralist ethical theory to flourish, a ‘repersonalised’ ethical theory (ibid: 34) that he explored through the rest of the text via a perceptive reading of the work of Emmanuel Levinas.

We do not have to be postmodernists to take the broader lesson on board. Ethical theories need to change with the times if they are to make sense of the moral behaviour of our time. They must be tied to a specific spatio-temporal context precisely because it is within that context that moral phenomena take place. One does not have to think that universals have become untenable – as the postmodernist does – to recognise that something that was (arguably) universally explanatory, say, sixty years ago may no longer achieve this today. Institutions rise and fall, power shifts both its source and its



target, and new technologies open up new forms and new locations of action and interaction. Ethical theories, ironically, are limited by the very striving for universality; eventually the ground changes beneath them, and they are no longer appropriate for making sense of what emerges – they are only ever snapshots of an era, whose claims to universality should not be mistaken for infinitude. What is required, therefore, is that we are vigilant of the limitations of the ethical theories we might use, feeding back our observations of the changing world to make sure we do not end up with a theory that time has done for but that no-one had the grace to check on. Bauman did this once but it is far from clear that we are still postmodern – he is not – and in any case it is unlikely that much would stay the same in the two decades since he published the book (even if we were still postmodern). Bauman produced an excellent study but the real message of it is to continue the project onwards.

In his *Life in Fragments* (1998), subtitled *Essays in Postmodern Morality*, Bauman presents a different but obviously related project – one, I suggest, very much in the tradition of Durkheim. Here Bauman explores the idea that we are all fundamentally, at an existential level, moral beings such that all life choices are moral dilemmas: ‘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*’ (ibid: 1). That is, at the most basic level: there is the other person, for whom I am responsible, and this is the indispensable minimum, as Durkheim would say, of society. What is most interesting in this text is the argument that moral problems – those things that cause suffering to others, that prevent the enactment of responsibility for others, or that obscure completely the suffering of others such that no responsibility is felt – find their roots in social contexts, such that a change in context means a change in the kinds of problems we witness. It is a simple observation and critical sociologists have long examined the links between certain social organisations and the inequality and suffering they cause. Where Bauman offers something different is in taking this back to morality, rather than class, economics, politics, etc. He argues that ‘the roots of postmodern moral problems go down to the fragmentariness of the social context and the episodicality of life pursuits’ (ibid: 8-9). The lesson here is that we must explore the environment that we occupy if we are to find the roots of moral problems, rather than attempt to derive moral problems from the top-down application

of an ethical theory. That is, instead of comparing social situations to a set of synthetically derived codes and standards in order to ascertain where there are moral problems, there is a task of critical sociology to be undertaken, to study society in order to uncover where that brute fact of moral responsibility, found in both Durkheim and Bauman, is missing or ignored.

It becomes clear – and not just because they are separated into two books – that ethics (or ethical theory) and morality are not synonymous for Bauman. He saw modernity as the ‘age of ethics’ and hoped that postmodernity would become ‘the age of morality’ (ibid: 37). For Bauman, morality is about responsibility for others whilst ethics is wholly about generated rules or codes of behaviour; morality is an observable act of goodness whilst ethics is the structure within which we decide what is good. To have morality without ethics, for Bauman, would be to have responsibility without coercion, spontaneous and voluntary. To do away with ethics would be to do away with the obfuscation of the ontological primitive of society: the challenge of the other person. Bauman advises: ‘delete the identity mark forced between morality and the ethically legislated morality – and it may well occur to you that with the demise of effective ethical regulation morality does not vanish, but, on the contrary, comes into its own’ (ibid: 36). It is far from clear that we need to leave ethical theory behind and Bauman does not, he just looks for a different way of doing ethical theory (in his *Postmodern Ethics*). What is needed is simply a new kind of ethical theory, one that no longer attempts to legislate, that moves away from prescription; a deregulation of morality but not without an ethical theory that would allow us to understand it. The role of ethical theory today should be to work from observation of our contemporary society – of the way that moral responsibility is evoked and that moral response is enacted – in order to tell us how morality operates within our society. It should not attempt to guide action but to explain what is happening. Where we think we see moral problems, ethical theory should be able to explain why they exist and why they are problematic. There is no need to separate morality and ethical theory; indeed it is unclear that such a separation is possible or desirable (see Bernstein (1995: 113) for whom the ‘separation of the moral from the ethical cannot be sustained’). Rather, the two are intimately related. Ethical theory must be rethought as something that takes its cue not from how we want responsibility and response to take place in society but how it does take place within

society and how the configuration of society impacts upon this. Throughout this work I take ethical theory to be a way of understanding contemporary responsibility; I take responsibility to include also response (a combination of moral sentiment or feeling and moral action, in the old currency); and I take moral problems to be institutions, environments, or events within which responsibility is obscured or action upon it blocked.

What Bauman so clearly shows in *Postmodern Ethics* is that ethical theory needs to keep up with social change if it is to help us to understand how responsibilities are initiated and acted upon. In his *Life in Fragments* he demonstrates that we need to examine our social conditions in terms of how they impact upon those responsibilities in a negative manner, to discover moral problems and think through their effects. Bauman keeps these two enterprises separate but the two are obviously intertwined. Slavoj Žižek, providing an admirably concise summary of Rene Descartes' *Discourse on Methods*, writes:

when we engage on a new path, full of dangers and shattering new insights, we need to stick to old established rules as a practical guide for our daily lives, although we are well aware that the new insights will compel us to provide a fresh foundation for our entire ethical edifice (2009b: 423).

That is, when faced with a changing environment, one must begin with an ethical theory but adapt and update it, challenge it in the face of what emerges as new. If we are to identify moral problems then we obviously need an ethical theory to begin with or else we would have no basis from which to deem them problematic. And in engaging on our new path – a study into changing or changed conditions – that ethical theory will change along the way, will have to be modified if it is to correctly articulate our moral nature and explain those new moral problems. In such a way one can (at least begin to) ascertain the ethical dimensions of contemporary society.

What if we have failed to keep pace with social change such that new insights are closed off to us, that our entire ethical edifice is out of step with the times – or worse, no longer of relevance? *We now live in a new media age and we need to rethink ethical theory if we are to make sense of responsibility in contemporary society.* Today, social

networking sites (such as Facebook or Twitter) allow us to collect friends or followers in massive quantities, to maintain friendship groups through an online site, facilitating interaction with people either virtually or through the organisation of face-to-face encounters. Telephony has become mobile and smart, allowing for greater connectivity between people – through texting, instant messaging services (such as Blackberry’s BBM service), and social networking applications that allow mobile access to sites such as Facebook – as well as connectivity to the Internet for web-browsing and email. Telephone calls can even take place online, via microphones and webcams as services such as Skype allow us to maintain long-distance relationships – with a greater thickness of communication – at a low cost. Not that such communication need be so boringly conventional, as entire graphical worlds, such as Second Life, can be rendered for people to mingle, meet, or maintain existing contacts through animated proxies known as avatars. Newspapers, no longer content with providing news for breakfast consumption, have become new too, publishing content online; articles can be subjected to ‘below the line’ commentary by the readership, allowing for all news or opinion to be presented along with response or counter-opinion, a cacophony of dissensus. Not that the newspapers need be limited anymore to conventional articles since now they can be hyperlinked, providing pathways to other online content, embedded with multimedia such as videos or audio (the interview that makes up the body of the story, say), or they can even eschew traditional form altogether, as with live-feed story coverage where updates to breaking news are provided in real-time, the webpage automatically refreshed. Of course, all of this is available wherever it is desired, since smart phones, tablet computers (such as the iPad), and e-readers (like the Kindle) – all assisted by a near-ubiquitous wif-fi network – take news out into the open. One might worry that televised news would fall by the wayside but it too has got with the programme; rolling news means that stories are available on a constant loop and that breaking news is captured as it breaks; and now the audience can participate, texting or emailing in comment or even content: so often now, thanks to the camera function of smart phones, it is an amateur that contributes the images to a story, be they still or moving. All in all, there is today greater social connectivity and are more fertile networks between people; a proliferation of images and information by virtue of the increase in both the channels of their communication and the providers of such content (professional and user-generated); and all of this, thanks to the ubiquity of the streams and the opportunity to

access them, the constancy of the flows and their pervasion through all environments, is on demand and constant. We need to consider how this impacts upon our responsibility for other people, when we are bombarded constantly and wherever with information about others, with images of others; when we can initiate relationships with other people regardless of geography or familiarity; when the world is opened up to us such that ignorance of what is going on can rarely be a convincing excuse, our awareness of events wherever they take place supplied, heightened – a God’s-eye view taken as normal, for granted. My concern in this present study is to explore how we are to understand responsibility and how it is acted upon when we operate under these circumstances. My focus is not on the technologies themselves – whether hardware or software – but on moral responsibility within this technological constellation, this new media age.

There is a growing body of work on both new media and the wider context of their use, what I have called the new media age. Theorists have attempted to come to terms with the political context of new media, both in terms of the informational capitalism that flows through them, a project that started at the dawn of the information society and has continued into today (Lyotard 2004c; Virilio 2005; Lash 2002, 2007; Thrift 2005), and the potential for a new democratic paradigm based on the free exchange of information (or, open source) (Lessig 2005; Levinson 2001; Berry 2008; Schuler 2008). These both form the background for debates about the surveillance of personal information collected from digital stores (Fuchs *et al* 2012; Lyon 2003; Marx 2002; Andrejevic 2007; Solove 2004). The potential for redefinitions of, and new opportunities for, friendship and community has been part of a debate that began with the popularisation of the Internet and has never really died-down (Wellman & Giulia 1999; Boden & Molotch 1994, 2004; Consalvo & Ess 2011; Wu Song 2009; Lewis & West 2009). At the cutting-edge of debates of new media are accounts of how we encounter others and interact with them online (Turkle 2011; Hillis 2009; Zhao & Elesh 2008; Gunkel 2010) and of the interplay of new media and city life (Pflieger *et al* 2008; Graham 2005; Burrows & Gane 2006; Beer 2007; Crang, Crosbie & Graham 2006; Geyh 2009). Many of these approaches pick out moral problems but each time within another disciplinary context: politics, community, the urban, etc. Even Charles Ess’ *Digital Media Ethics* (2009) fits more readily within debates of open-source, surveillance, citizenship and e-

democracy than of ethical theory. The predominant approach to studies of new media has been political in orientation and there is the risk of a gap in knowledge when it comes to understanding the ethical dimension. What is needed is an account of how moral responsibility and action operates within this new environment and how this very environment itself might affect both. Bauman has undertaken a similar endeavour once before (with postmodernity in place of a new media age) but it is necessary to pick up the mantle and continue the project – especially since he has practically nothing to say about new media. Despite a profusion of excellent research into the area, an account of ethics along these lines has not yet been contributed to. This is the purpose of this present work: to explore contemporary responsibility in order to provide an ethical theory that is informed by new developments, contemporary events, and the problems that emerge in our new media environment.

If we are to follow the advice of Descartes/Žižek then before embarking down this new path, this inquiry into what might be new of the ethics of a new media age, we need first to bring along with us a familiar travelling-companion, an established ethical theory. Bauman took Levinas along with him on his ethical expedition through postmodernity and beyond. He concluded *Life in Fragments* by proclaiming Levinas ‘the greatest ethical philosopher’ of the last century (1998: 267-268), and in a recent interview dubbed him his ‘ethics teacher’ (Dawes 2011: 131). Bauman’s postmodern period is heavily influenced – nay, reliant – on the rich body of work provided by his ‘teacher’, although the influence is becoming weaker in the liquid modern period of Bauman’s thought. For example, in his *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers?* (2008b) Bauman begins with a short discussion of Levinas but then moves towards a sort of global cosmopolitanism, whilst texts such as *Liquid Modernity* (2008c) and *Community* (2008a) make little mention of ethical theory or morality. Even so, Bauman, and also Durkheim, have shown that morality and ethics fall within the purview of the social theorist, even if the former has, to an extent, lost interest. They have also shown how to go about studying morality and writing ethical theory in ways that are sociologically useful. Durkheim avoided ethical theory altogether, focusing purely on morality as sociality. Bauman saw prescriptive and universal ethical theory as obscuring moral problems in society, masking over injustice or creating false problems. When such ethical theories are done away with and a postmodern ethics introduced, he

maintains, there is a clear opportunity for critical sociologists to study morality free from the illusions of metanarratives (Bauman 2009: 3). When considering what ethical theory to begin with we need to think in terms of sociality and avoid ethical theories that create moral problems out of thin air – or at least out of abstract philosophising.

Do we still need to be postmodern to think that what is needed is an ethical theory that is informed by society rather than projected onto society? Bauman now understands contemporary society as being in a liquid modern stage rather than postmodern but I see no need to split hairs. Jean-François Lyotard, from whom many caught the incredulity towards metanarratives, preferred the term ‘rewriting modernity’ to postmodernity (2004c: 24-25). By swapping ‘post-’ for ‘re-’ he emphasises that what people (including himself) had referred to as postmodernity was not after modernity but a process within it. By emphasising ‘rewriting’ the active rather than the epochal becomes the focus; that is, rewriting modernity is a project engaged in by philosophers, architects, literary figures, and so on, rather than a period in history that has happened to us. It is ongoing and constantly changing as modernity is rewritten. As such, if liquid modernity picks out an epoch – and this is how it appears to be used in Bauman’s work – then it is not incompatible with the postmodern redefined as rewriting modernity. I make no claims as to whether we are postmodern or liquid modern, or something else for that matter, only that ethical theory should be rewritten for our new media age.

Is there a need for a postmodern ethical theory (as Bauman suggests) even if we make no claims about postmodernity? It is more obvious what is not needed. A traditionally prescriptive ethics would be largely useless for this project: all it would allow for is the categorisation of things observed into good and bad based on a pre-existing set of ideas about what is good or bad; we would learn nothing about what is new in society or what challenges are posed to a responsible life. In short, nothing would be rewritten, and so both applied ethics and universal maxims, from principles of utility to categorical imperatives, are to be avoided. Rule-based ethics do not adequately describe moral experience and so should be rejected for the purposes of this project.

The approach of someone like Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue* (2006) is preferred. Here, MacIntyre argues that ethical theory must be written from observations of the

institutions and formations of contemporary society. This represents a bold challenge to the discipline of philosophy, which MacIntyre criticises as armchair thinking, too concerned with what dead philosophers have written than with which conception of morality is appropriate for the time (1981 when *After Virtue* was first published). MacIntyre's contribution is a neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics, where virtues are taken to be character traits that (1) allow for the individual to flourish in life and (2) allow for the individual to flourish within a specific society. This flourishing through virtues is a progression towards the Good Life; we are all, for MacIntyre, working towards a *telos* or purpose, embarked on a quest for the Good Life. What is the Good Life? '[T]he good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man' (MacIntyre 2006: 219). I think this definition is deeply unsatisfactory but the account of virtue ethics has a more pressing flaw: it is reliant upon a narrative conception of self that is not self-evident. MacIntyre writes: 'The unity of a human life is the unity of a narrative quest' (this quest being the aforementioned search for the Good Life) (ibid). However, the narrative account of self, although currently popular within philosophy and the social sciences, suggests we all conceive of ourselves as authors of a novel (our lives) when this is not a universal experience, and to base one's ethical theory on this misguided assumption is therefore to build it on infirm foundations (see Strawson 2004). We can admire MacIntyre's approach – he also argued that the fragmentariness of late-1970s and 1980s Western society was a moral problem since it would disrupt one's quest – but a virtue ethics reliant on the narrative unity of self brings too many tendentious presuppositions to the table.

Like MacIntyre, Richard Rorty defiantly rejects the predominant ahistorical strand of much ethical theory. Beginning with the proposition that 'cruelty is the worst thing we do' (Rorty 2008: xv), Rorty offers an account of moral life that rejects the possibility of ever answering questions about how to reduce cruelty, when to intervene to correct injustices, or how to make moral choices in a cruel world:

Anybody who thinks there are well-grounded theoretical answers to this sort of question – algorithms for resolving moral dilemmas of this sort – is still, in his heart, a theologian or a metaphysician. He believes in an order beyond time and change which both determines the point of human existence and establishes a hierarchy of responsibilities (ibid).



That is, such a person has lost sight of social reality and is engaged in theorising that provides neat answers where there can be no answers at all. Instead, the approach to ethics that Rorty favours is one that factors in what communities have done in the past and what they may do in the future; he argues that for a given community ‘loyalty to itself is morality enough’ and ‘that it need be responsible only to its own traditions, and not to the moral law as well’ (1993: 325). Moral convictions, for Rorty, exist where needs and beliefs overlap within a community, and when a moral actor considers her responsibilities, between solidarity (actions in line with the values of one’s community) and objectivity (actions justified by an appeal to a nonhuman reality), she should choose solidarity (see Rorty 2006). Once again, we should admire the rejection of abstract thinking and endorse the idea that ethical theorising should be grounded in a specific time-space context but the narrow account of responsibility should be rejected. This notion of an individual’s responsibility pertains only within historically defined community groups, which is inappropriate for a new media age where morality can surely no longer be limited along such lines (i.e. awareness of others through various media feeds presumably explodes such insularity). Either we have to say that such an account is counter-intuitive, and reject it, or that these communities are now global, which seems imprudent when one could simply start with an ethical theory that does not need to be so expanded – perhaps compromised – from the start. There is a third option, which is to agree with Rorty that groups only have responsibility for themselves and not others, in which case moral responsibility becomes an underwhelming subject area, to say the least, and there would not be much to say about a new media age in which awareness of others is increased, since this would not matter a jot when it comes to moral responsibility or response. This diversion through Rorty does, however, bring us back to the postmodern.

Bauman’s ethical guide through postmodernity, Levinas, once named Durkheim as one of his first philosophical influences (Levinas 2009: 26). For Levinas, as for Durkheim and Bauman, morality is at the heart of sociality – and this is perhaps why these three are united in an intellectual triangle that represents the greatest body of work on morality and ethics in social theory to date. An ethical theory that says something about the fundament of society is desired for this present study; appeals to nonhuman realities and deference to philosophical debates, as Rorty and MacIntyre have argued, are to be

rejected in favour of a theory that speaks to the time-space context of the society it would seek to make sense of. Also to be rejected are ethical theories that are built on the exclusion of those who are not same, as with MacIntyre's universalising of narrativity and Rorty's narrowly conceived responsibility. For these reasons it is to the work of Levinas that I initially turn.

## **Overview**

The process of surveying the ethical dimensions of the new media age, measuring it up for an appropriately formulated ethical theory, requires the close relation of the theoretical and the empirical. If we are to understand contemporary responsibility then it is vital that we understand the environments, events and encounters in which it is initiated and acted-upon. As such, each of the chapters collected below, barring the next and the last, is grounded in a case study. These case studies are diverse when considered as topics – avatar interaction; global media events; networked gated communities; social media interaction; and surveillance through social networking – yet are united by what they tell us about responsibility today and, ultimately, the lessons they provide for the contemporary ethical theorist. The approach taken here is adamantly against that of writing ethical theory without regard for the environment it would make sense of and against the simplistic approach of shoe-horning ethical theories into this new environment; this latter approach would simply provide misleading results. Instead, the need to begin with an ethical theory is recognised – it is difficult to understand how one could operate without such a theory in place, however loosely one clings to it – but that ethical theory is to be put rigorously to work in the new media context. As stated above, the resource here will be the work of Levinas and it will be worked through an environment which it does not describe and in which sits uncomfortably. This will show the limitations of Levinas' work, the elements of it that must be reworked and its blind-spots for a new media age; these will demand active readings and reworkings, as well as recourse to theoretical resources that take us beyond these limitations, such as Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Paul Virilio, and Slavoj Žižek. The work of Lyotard, in particular, is well placed to understand the new media age, albeit not in the discourse of ethical theory. The approach is not to simply add the insights on media and technology to those

of Levinas on ethics but to work in the space between the two, to write ethical theory eloquent about our new media age. This will not be homage to Levinas, or any other theorist for that matter; the work of Levinas will be made to work anew, taken beyond its limitations such that what emerges is not only significantly altered but unique to this study.

### *Chapter Two: A Return to Levinas?*

In order to assess the ethical dimensions of the new media age it is first necessary to have an existing ethical theory to act as a measure of change. From such an ethical theory it will be possible to see which changes in our environment demand most pressing attention, simply by observing the ways that the theory appears intuitively to be out of date. These changes will then recommend case studies of contemporary events and sites that will be used to redraw ethical theory for our new media environment. As such, in Chapter Two I will introduce the work of Emmanuel Levinas. The aims here are fairly modest, to provide interpretive readings of Levinas' key texts such that the following chapters have a base to work from. These key texts are: 'Reality and Its Shadow (2006d); *Time and the Other* (2008d); *Totality and Infinity* (2007); and *Otherwise Than Being* (2008c) – although there are numerous collections of essays and interviews that will be used throughout the present work as and when they add additional colour.<sup>1</sup> What will emerge is an account of ethics that takes place in the encounter between two people, wherein the proximity to another person's suffering necessitates a response to alleviate said suffering. The selection of one ethical theory over others is impossible to fully justify in so short a piece of work but I will argue in concluding this chapter that the intuition that Levinas' account is appropriate is borne out by the preceding exegeses. That is, his work presents an approach to ethical theory that is, in part, suited for coming to terms with the new media age. However, Levinas' ethics is not without its limitations when considered within this contemporary environment, from his rejection of the image to his omission of the event, and from the changing nature of proximity to our contemporary aversion to it: it is on these such

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<sup>1</sup> The obvious omission here is *Existence and Existents* (2008b) which is an interesting groundwork to Levinas' later philosophical output but that is, for the purposes of this present work, largely passed-over since it is subsumed by his later work.

limitations that the following chapters focus, grounding each one in a tangible case study in order to draw conclusions for redrawing ethical theory.

### *Chapter Three: Avatar Ethics*

If responsibility takes place in the encounter with another person then can it be said to take place online, where users of various social applications interact through proxies called avatars? It could be argued (and I will approach just such arguments) that the encounter is always with the other user's avatar and not with the other user. It would follow from this that there is no ethical encounter with that other user and therefore that the ethical theory of Levinas cannot make sense of morality online. In order to overcome this obvious limitation I will utilise the aesthetic theory of Aristotle (and the revisitation of this by Hans-Georg Gadamer) and Immanuel Kant in order to argue that the avatar as an image acts as a gesture towards the idea of the suffering of others as unacceptable, that invokes, what I will call, moral humility. This involves rejecting Levinas' rejection of images from the moral realm. This would not, however, be sufficient to claim that there is a direct ethical relationship between people. In order to reinstate the encounter I will explore different kinds of signification in order to ground the avatar in its user, such that to encounter these proxies is to encounter the user that stands behind it at the same time. After arguing for the unsuitability of the signs index and icon for this task, I will argue that Lyotard's notion of the tensor will allow us to conceive of avatar interaction as a one-to-one relationship in which moral enthusiasm for the other person is possible. The rise of avatar interaction demands that ethical theory draw from aesthetics and theories of signification; with the proliferation of images and signs, and, crucially, our interaction through such images and signs, it is vital that ethics is not limited to an understanding of fleshy encounters only.

### *Chapter Four: The Limitations of Morality*

Of course, the numbers of encounters that are made possible by new media are great. These may be of varying levels of engagement – active/passive, thick/thin – but Levinas is clear: to encounter the other person is to enter into an ethical relationship, and an encounter is an absolute, one does or does not encounter another person. If the new

media multiply encounters then can we say that we are on the verge of a moral revolution, of a massive community where responsibility is similarly multiplied? In this chapter I will argue that this is both theoretically extravagant and in actuality impracticable. Levinas offers an account of infinite responsibility for others, in the sense that there are always more people to help and more that can be done for those helped, but this does not translate to infinite moral action. Rather, the moral agent always falls short and, I will argue, the greater awareness we have of others thanks to new media only makes our falling-short more obvious. New media, with increased encounters with needy others, may indeed heighten one's responsibility for others but it will also increase the number of people we fail. Jacques Derrida's reading of Levinas will be utilised to drive this argument. As for the practical limitations, these new technologies will be shown to both extend one's actions beyond one's sense of responsibility, such that we might act without moral humility, an argument derived from Bauman's work on responsibility and technology; and extend one's awareness of suffering beyond one's ability to act, such that one's moral enthusiasm is forlorn, the principal resource here being Virilio. That is, seeing- and acting-at-a-distance bring new limitations to moral responsibility. It is necessary to turn to these contemporary theorists of technology to make these arguments since we find no consideration of technological extensions of acting and seeing in the work of Levinas. These latter arguments on the practical limitations of morality will draw on media coverage of contemporary events: the English riots of 2011; the Arab Spring of 2010/11; 11 September 2001; and the Breivik massacre in Norway, 2011.

#### *Chapter Five: An Ethics of the Event*

What these explorations of events show is that new media do not just facilitate personal relationships with others (ethical encounters). They are also revolutionising the way we learn about and engage with global events. These events have received plenty of attention in terms of their political content whilst there is an obvious moral dimension where media events depict suffering, as with terrorist attacks and natural disasters; that is, we can say that such happenings are 'bad' or 'evil'. More difficult to conceptualise is the ethical significance of such media events, which is to say, what impact they have on those who follow them in terms of responsibility and response. In this chapter I will

outline an ethics of the event, beginning with Levinas' definition of the encounter with the suffering of the other person as an ethical event. These ethical events are 'everyday' in comparison to the major but relatively infrequent events that we receive through the media, such as terrorist attacks. I will argue that what gives these latter events their ethical dimension is the aggregate of those mundane ethical events, that the media presentation brings to the mind of the viewer a feeling of sublime suffering, an unimaginable level of human suffering. With this conceptual framework in place I will proceed to explore how the real-time coverage of new media events impacts upon the response of responsibility for those – and this is crucial and different to the limitations discussed in the previous chapter – who are caught up in the events. That is, I will examine how responding to the suffering of others is affected by the availability of new media coverage to those in and amongst the suffering, using the Mumbai Attacks of November 2008 as illustration. This will not only give us an ethics of the event, which is desperately lacking in existing literature, but one that allows us to identify a shift from the moral actor to the actor-spectator – something unique to an age of ubiquitous news feeds.

### *Chapter Six: Proximity and Urban Fear*

The environment within which moral action takes place must always be in mind when considering ethical theory; Levinas' idea of the ethical encounter has a practical, empirical dimension to it but it is important to explore how the environment of encounters is today different. In the first of two chapters that approach environment in this way I will explore the gating of urban spaces in order to argue that we need today to provide a more repulsive account of the nature of the other than is found in the work of Levinas. The notion of an event is again taken as an important aspect of ethical theory, although attention is given solely to those everyday ethical events that come from encountering others. Surveying literature on gated communities it is evident that they are notable for being (1) highly networked and (2) in part motivated by a 'fear of the other'. Noting that the latter is under-explained, I will first argue that Levinas' account of ethics is useful for articulating this fear, if we emphasise the repulsive nature of the other. Levinas' ethical encounter, I will argue, is a two-fold source of ontological insecurity: the other is fundamentally unknowable; and the response, as well as the

reaction of the other to it, is likewise unknowable. This is the grounds for stating that there is a repulsion of proximity. Transferring this back to a consideration of networked gating, I will argue that urban and new media technologies, when combined, allow individuals to withdraw from public space without complete disengagement; their use allows for encounters with ‘feared’ others to be foreclosed at the same time that encounters with favoured others are made easier to organise, a process of selective disassociation. The inherent repulsion of proximity lends itself to what I will call, after Virilio’s notion of the spastic, moral spasticity: the desire to exert greater control over the environment of encounters, the expression of which is technologically-assisted selective disassociation.

### *Chapter Seven: Civility and Social Media*

In the second of the two chapters examining environment, I will examine how the architecture of social media sites impacts upon encounters and forms of interaction. Transposing Bauman’s account of civility as *openness to the stranger despite their strangeness* from the city to the online environment, I will examine to what extent we can discern this openness in social media and what impact the architecture of social media has on our ability to encounter strangers as strangers. I will argue that the design of social networking sites is such that they do not engender civility, with a distinction to be made between real friends and ‘ersatz-friends’. For this latter group there are a range of design features – adding, blocking, profiles, status updates – that lead to a more passive form of interaction that refuses to engage with the stranger as stranger. I will build on this by examining Facebook status updates and Tweeting – the delivery of short, often undirected messages on Twitter – and Facebook stalking. With discussion of the former, I will return to the work of Levinas on conversation in order to assess how the modes of communication encouraged by social media can be understood in terms of openness to the other person; and with regards the latter, I will draw on Žižek in order to understand the motivation for this unilateral virtual proximity, undercut by the absence of physical proximity and interaction. These two features are shown to channel indifference and voyeurism, respectively, towards strangers. This chapter marks a departure from the ethical theorist’s concern for understanding moral responsibility, but for good reason: it is essential to get the measure of these new media environments,

and the forms of interaction that take place within them, before we can reflect upon what this means in terms of responsibility and the ethical theory that would understand it – the latter to be considered in Chapter Nine.

### *Chapter Eight: Surveillance through Social Media*

Social networking sites are not only environments that facilitate varying degrees of interaction between users; they also enforce the interaction of a user with corporations. That is, they are not just social spaces but consumer capitalist spaces. In this final case study I will explore how users are targeted by algorithmic surveillance technologies in order to (1) mine data and (2) generate user-tailored advertisements. This represents a shift from considering encounters between people in certain environments (as in the previous two chapters) to a consideration of how that environment is shared with thinking softwares that operate in the interests of increasing the efficiency of consumption. For the purposes of this chapter the work of Levinas is considered to offer little to help us understand the moral problems this creates; Levinas' work represents a humanism of the other and his understanding of objects would not account for the lively, thinking softwares that pervade online environments. At the same time, it is required that we have the theoretical resources to understand the operation of an information-hungry capitalist system. As such, I will turn to Lyotard's work on the inhumanity of advanced capitalism, with its drive for efficiency through new technologies and its disregard for what it means to be human. Putting this to work in the context of surveillance through social networking sites, I will adopt a reading that, unlike Lyotard's, explicitly highlights particular moral problems, here in relation to social media sites as facilitators of frictionless capitalism; the commodification of social groups; and the use of 'thinking' softwares to process people. Further, I will demonstrate the problems stemming from the treatment of difference groups; from the application of algorithms in the social context; and the question of users' complicity in the process, coerced or active. As with the previous chapter, this is a preliminary exploration – this time of the non-neutrality of online spaces versus physical spaces – and conclusions of its findings as they relate to the future of ethical theory will be discussed in the next chapter.



## *Chapter Nine: Conclusion: Ethics, Time, and Space*

Each previous chapter has its own self-contained conclusion whilst at the same time contributing to a larger exploration of the ethical dimensions of the new media age. In this final chapter I wish to draw all this together by considering this material through a discussion of time and space, those fundamental dimensions of the new media age. This involves a consideration of time and ethics; of the impact of capitalist time-saving on the environments in which we interact as moral agents; and of the space of ethics. There are, then, three concluding points. First, through an exploration of gating and events, refracted through Henri Bergson's work on time, I will conclude that there can be identified a *repulsion of the future* which impacts upon our ethical encounters with others. Second, by returning to surveillance, civility, and the limitations of morality, but considered now in terms of how the demands on time made in an advanced capitalist society alter social spaces, I will conclude that new media environments, far from being neutral spaces in which moral action can go about unhindered, are in practice governed by a principle of efficiency that is not motivated by considerations of the human good – such that we might say, after Lyotard, that they are *inhuman*. Finally, returning once more to gating and civility, this time in order to consider the troubling interplay of proximity to suffering and indifference to suffering in social spaces, I will rearticulate the idea of *the repulsion of proximity*, concluding by demonstrating both its use as a concept and what needs to be rethought in relation to it. These three conclusions, the two repulsions as contemporary dispositions of moral being, and the inhumanity of the environment as a moral problem, are taken to be *both* contributions to our understanding of contemporary responsibility and articulations of moral problems in a new media age.

## 2. A RETURN TO LEVINAS?

What does it involve, to return to a thinker? This question is approached by Gilles Deleuze (1997: 115-118) in the afterword to his essay on the philosopher Henri Bergson. He warns that such a return should not merely be a renewed interest in the thinker's work but rather an extension of their project 'in relation to the transformation of life and society' (ibid: 115). Deleuze is surely correct: 'return' suggests recovering something from the past and one must put it through contemporary paces or risk mere philosophical archaeology. With Bergson's philosophy of time, scientific advances since Einstein's work on time would need to be taken into account; a return to the ethical theory of Emmanuel Levinas demands that we demonstrate its ability to speak to the contemporary environments in which encounters between people take place, and to technological advances that alter awareness of responsibilities and the ability to respond to the suffering of others. Zygmunt Bauman (1998; 2009) did this with his work on postmodern ethics in the 1990s but he had little to say about emerging new media then and little contribution has been made since. Whilst his approach towards ethics was merited, it is an approach that must be taken anew if we are to understand responsibility in a new media age. In order to demonstrate the key areas in which the project of extension must take place I will here survey Levinas' work, from selected early essays on image and on time, to his two great texts, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*. The approach here is to provide a critical reading that will form the backbone for this project as a whole and to identify what is still relevant – and what needs to be reworked. If Bauman has passed over in silence new media it may well be because the theory he utilised, that of Levinas, could make little sense of technological developments; it is vital that we confront these developments and so I will here identify the areas of Levinas' work that are inappropriate as they stand for a new media age. This, in turn, will recommend the case studies for exploration in subsequent chapters through which I will develop an account of ethics more suited to our contemporary situation.

## 2.1. Early Essays

This first section is concerned with two essays published in the 1940s: a short piece entitled ‘Reality and Its Shadow’, which originally appeared as an article in Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Les Temps Modernes* in 1948; and ‘Time and the Other’, a series of four lectures delivered at Jean Wahl’s Philosophical College in Paris from 1946 to 1947 and published as a lengthy essay in 1948. These texts provide the most detailed explorations by Levinas of image and time respectively. These are important essays within the context of the present work since, in Chapter Three, Levinas’ work on image will be shown to be inadequate for thinking about new media interaction forms, specifically avatars; and I will return to a discussion of time and ethics in Chapter Nine.

In ‘Reality and Its Shadow’ (2006d) Levinas is concerned to examine the relationship between that which is depicted by art and the work of art itself. He argues that at the most elementary level art is a procedure that substitutes an image for an object. This substitution has the effect of neutralizing the object: ‘A represented object, by the simple fact of becoming an image, is converted into a non-object’ (ibid: 5). Rather than being something one can act towards and with (an object), the image is outside of action, becoming mere sensation (a non-object), such that the individual’s relationship with the image is one of passivity. The relationship of the object and the image is one of resemblance – a relationship that has been discussed from Aristotle to Hans-Georg Gadamer and beyond (see Chapter Three) – and for Levinas this gives it the quality of a person’s shadow. A person is a being, and a being resembles itself but is at once more than this resemblance: it is what is; a shadow only resembles. So it is with objects and images, except they need not be co-present like the person and her shadow. An image, by being only resemblance, highlights the absence of that which it resembles. Take a painting: that which is present – spots of coloured paint – points to the absence of what is depicted. These spots of paint – or, indeed, slabs of marble or whatever makes up the artwork – occupy the place of the object fully: ‘The consciousness of the representation lies in knowing that the object is not there’ (ibid: 7).

Levinas’ account takes on an ethical dimension when he considers the combination of the absent object with the nature of the image, arguing that ‘every image is in the last

analysis plastic, and that every artwork is in the end a statue – a stoppage of time’ (ibid: 8). So, for example, ‘the Mona Lisa will smile eternally’ (ibid: 9) but it is a smile that will never broaden. In the image time has stopped and ‘an instant endures infinitely’ (ibid). The future is forever held in abeyance, the image being temporally congealed, a petrified instant. The instant that endures infinitely is stuck: nothing can ever happen in it, such that ‘the power of freedom congeals’, too, ‘into impotence’ (ibid). Levinas concludes that the image – and art in general – being ‘essentially disengaged, constitutes, in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion’ (ibid: 12). This conclusion amounts to a rejection of images of other people being a source of responsibility (see Chapter Three for my discussion of this unwise rejection): the image is silent since it is frozen in time, so there can be no call for help; and the viewer is passive, since they are in a relationship with a non-object towards which there can be no action and because any action that would occur must be directed *through* time when the image is *stuck* in time, the future in which response would take place being forever yet to come (see Chapter Nine for my discussion of this in tandem with the work of Bergson). So, paintings and photographs and whatever other kinds of images, regardless of what they depict, are fundamentally amoral since they do not allow for a response in time. Take, for example, Nick Ut’s famous photograph of a young girl fleeing nude down a road after a napalm attack in South Vietnam, 1972. Levinas’ argument applied here would be that this photograph highlights the absence of the girl: she is not present and so no response to the suffering she is clearly subjected to can be enacted. That suffering – and this I think is counter-intuitive since such photographs *do* seem to capture and evoke human suffering – is, according to Levinas, never fully expressed because, like the Mona Lisa’s smile, it is caught in time and so the call for help is never fully articulated. Finally, as the viewer looks at this photograph they are viewing a frozen instant, a statue that does not exist in time, a present that endures but has no duration; a response is not practicable because to respond to this would be to have a relationship with that girl in the future when all that is opened up through the photograph is a relationship with that girl in a moment that will never move forwards. (It should be noted that the photograph is nearly forty years old and so any response would now be out of time, that is, there is no course of action that could intervene in the specific suffering of that girl.) The photograph is amoral because it brings the viewer into confrontation with a suffering that, frozen in time, she cannot affect; that suffering

girl, if we consider purely the relationship with the image, will suffer eternally. In this way, images of suffering have no moral content because they do not allow for an immediate response (we will return to this discussion in Chapters Four and Five in relation to events). They are for admiring and appreciating; for passive subjects – and moral *action* cannot be passive.

The relationship between time and ethics that emerges in this essay is thought through more clearly in Levinas' 'Time and the Other' (2008d). Describing the essay in an interview with Philippe Nemo, Levinas summarises that '*Time and the Other* is a study of the relationship with the Other insofar as its element is time' (2009: 56).<sup>2</sup> Here he explores the idea that 'time is not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, [...] it is the very relationship of the subject with the Other' (2008d: 39). In his earlier *Existence and Existents* (2008b),<sup>3</sup> Levinas argued that 'existence is a relationship between *an* existent and itself' (ibid: 25), which is to say that existing is fundamentally self-referential and without sociality: existing does not presuppose a relationship with others. This state Levinas refers to as hypostasis, where the 'I' exerts their virility and power on the world. Returning to this theme in 'Time and the Other', Levinas writes: 'Existing resists every relationship and multiplicity. It concerns no one other than the existent' (2008d: 43); existing, for Levinas, necessitates solitude. This conceptual

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<sup>2</sup> Levinas, in the French, uses the words *autrui*, most often translated as Other, and *autre*, usually rendered as other. *The Other* refers to another person, all those from the perspective of the 'I' (the individual who refers to herself in the first person) that are not the 'I', whilst *the other* refers to otherness itself, alterity. So, for example, in the passage to which this note is appended Levinas is setting out the argument that time is intersubjective, that it is achieved in the relationship with another person. Throughout this present work I will not alter translations when reproducing passages from Levinas' work but I will refer to the other person as *the other* or simply *the other person* (and whatever other variations that follow this simple rule) and to otherness as *that which is other* or simply *otherness*. I prefer this because I believe that it presents Levinas' work more straightforwardly, that it more clearly demarcates discussions of actual people and the state of alterity, and that, in the case of reference to *the other person* it avoids confusion with work that takes the other to be an alienated minority group rather than literally the other person. Since there is no absolute consistency amongst translators of Levinas anyway, this should not add any confusion – in fact, passages quoted will, I hope, benefit from the context of my translation of the terms such that it should be obvious whether the discussion is of *autrui* or *autre*.

<sup>3</sup> *Existents and Existents* is a curious text. Written whilst Levinas was held in stalags between 1940 and 1945, it is without awareness of any philosophical work published in this period. (The most frequent references are to pre-war works by Bergson, Maurice Blanchot, and Martin Heidegger.) I find this curious because the book is largely concerned with the sort of phenomenological issues that are more familiar to the work of Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, whose key texts in this regard he could not have read at this time, than to anything else Levinas has written. Whilst the work on insomnia and fatigue are regarded as preliminary steps towards Levinas' account of ethics (Boothroyd 2002: 18), I have found it prudent to omit discussion of much of this text since it would provide a somewhat circuitous route to my focus on responsibility, one that would be merited but for which there is insufficient space. See Caygill 2010 for an account of Levinas' time in captivity, his work during this period, and the prison notebooks he kept.

picture, then, suggests that there are many existing things but that, purely from a consideration of existence, they are separate and isolated; existence is the existent's business. Clearly, there is a disconnection between existing things that needs to be bridged, we need to formulate a way of understanding how this fundamental solitude is overcome: a departure from the self-referential self (although states of solitude and self-reference will re-appear in later discussions of gaming and social media in Chapters Six and Seven respectively). Without such a departure there would be no ground for social life. It is at this point that Levinas introduces time. He recasts hypostasis as the existence of the self in the present, a present without time wherein the 'I' is absolutely free. Levinas writes:

Solitude is the very unity of the existent, the fact that there is something in existing starting from which existence occurs. The subject is alone because it is one. A solitude is necessary in order for there to be a freedom of beginning, the existent's mastery over existing – that is, in brief, in order for there to be an existent. Solitude is thus not only a despair and an abandonment, but also a virility, a pride and a sovereignty (ibid: 54-55).

This is a dense passage and requires unpacking. First, solitude as 'the very unity of the existent' means that it is necessary to conceive of the existent as isolated if we are to distinguish it from other existing things. Therefore 'loneliness'<sup>4</sup> is necessary for self-identity, for there to be a coherent individual. Second, it is because we are alone – separate and without reference to others – that we possess freedom. This is why the hypostatic state is not simply negative: it is also a perfect state of power and unrestrained activity. That is, if one were perfectly alone as an existent then one's actions need not be limited and one's desires can be unlimited. This does not pertain in reality and when we consider the role of time we can understand the consequences.

If one could really exist in this imaginary state of solitude then there would be no encounter with anything other to the self. Despite the unparalleled freedom that this affords it would also be a limited state of existence since it lacks any social aspect, which for Levinas is a cause for sorrow. This is where time comes in to play: things that

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<sup>4</sup> Note the use of emotive terms such as 'loneliness' and 'solitude'; Levinas is here using them figuratively but in such a way that lays the foundation for the later connection between the conditions of our being and the way that this necessitates our ethical sociality with others, such that responsibility is the result of the very nature of human existence.

are other to the self *are the future*. That is, ‘the very relationship with the other is the relationship with the future’ (ibid: 77).<sup>5</sup> The solitary self exists in a sort of timeless present but when we consider that a movement through time is a movement towards encounters with things that are other to the self then we introduce a relationship between existing things that can be understood as a ‘relationship with the future’, or, in a more familiar register, we get the idea of a trajectory through time that involves the negotiation of other things that are to be encountered. Such encounters are always in the future since they are always yet to come, the present being an ideal state (the kind of ideal state in which the self finds no need for such a project of co-existence). So, when we factor in the role of time we see that an existent is not alone, that as they progress towards the future so do they enter into relationships with other existing things. Time is a movement towards the other. This is not so difficult to grasp: pause video footage of a crowd scene, say; there you have a snap-shot of all these people with absolutely no relationship to each other at that moment, a group of people stuck in their own present where nothing is to be negotiated: this is hypostasis. Only when the footage is unpaused is any relationship between the people in the crowd possible, is there a demand for the people to negotiate each other’s existence, since a relationship needs must be consummated in time as well as space.

This trivial example takes us to the heart of Levinas’ work on time: the encounter with the other person as an ethical relationship. Levinas writes:

The relationship with the Other, the face-to-face with the Other, the encounter with a face that at once gives and conceals the Other, is the situation in which an event happens to a subject who does not assume it, who is utterly unable in its regard, but where nonetheless in a certain way it is in front of the subject (ibid: 78-79).

When we encounter another person – ‘face-to-face’ – the locus point of this encounter is the face of the other person. It ‘gives’ and it ‘conceals’ in so far as it provides the shop-front of social commerce but at the same time is an unsurpassable barrier to the ‘back of house’, so to speak, of the other person; that is, one cannot get past the face and achieve an intimate and accurate understanding of the other person, their motivations or

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<sup>5</sup> The reference to ‘the other’ in this passage indicates otherness, ‘that which is other’, rather than the other person, though this association will be made presently.

intentions, their inner-life. The encounter with the other is an event, something that happens to the self but that is beyond its control. It is in front of the subject in that it is to come in time and in that it is achieved in proximity. This sets the other person apart from other objects (other existents) that one might encounter. These do not give and conceal, since they have no inner-life: objects can be well understood on the terms of the subject. Objects roll-over whilst other people resist. Objects are encountered on an instrumental level; they do not happen to the subject as an event but are used by the subject. What the face represents, then, is that the other person is a limitation of the freedom of the subject. What this event consists of is the revelation of the other as someone who exists on their own terms and so to whom one's own actions cannot be without limit: no longer are the subject's possibilities endless since the world is shared with other people. As Levinas declares 'the Other is what I myself am not' (ibid: 83) and so self-concern must be broadened to responsibility, lest we act inconsistently as if we are in that imagined, timeless state of solitude. There is the other person – and that is the beginning of morality. The encounter is an 'awaiting' to be aspired to, an 'ethical adventure' to be embarked upon: it is the future (ibid: 32-33).

Immediately there are two things to be noted: first, Levinas is not engaged in a phenomenology of the face since this would concern vision which, as we shall see presently, pertains to the same, and so his work on the face stands apart from notable sociological face work (for example, Goffman 2010); and, second, Levinas develops here a human-centred approach that persists through the entirety of his work and which does not accommodate non-human actors or less passive objects, a position that will be shown to be insufficient through a discussion of algorithmic surveillance in Chapter Eight.

## **2.2. Totality and Infinity**

This concern for the face-to-face encounter and the responsibility that emerges from it is continued into *Totality and Infinity* (2007), first published in 1961. *Totality* is the chief function of Western metaphysics, grouping everything together in a unity that recognises nothing beyond it and that loses sight of the singularity of that which is so



grouped; expanding upon this in interview, Levinas (2009: 75) explains that totalising is the attempt of human thought to contain the world, allowing for nothing other than what can be thought – thus reducing the world to thought. *Infinity* is that which is exterior to thought, that which cannot be encompassed by a totality and so has been ignored in the history of Western metaphysics; it is revealed in the relationship of ‘the same’ with ‘otherness’, that is, with an identity, an ‘I’ (as described above), with something outside of itself, which is not itself. Levinas’ aim throughout this text is to argue for the primacy of infinity over totality and to cast intersubjectivity, the relationship of the ‘I’ with another person, as a form of hospitality in which ‘the idea of infinity is consummated’ (2007: 27). Infinity has philosophical primacy over totality, it is produced in the relationship to otherness, which is instantiated as a ‘welcoming’ or hospitality towards the other person – morality. This organising argument for Levinas’ work is, I find, compelling: if we consider all that is exterior to be reducible to its intelligibility then, when confronted with other people, we reduce them to objects of our intellect and fail to treat them as thought-ful subjects in their own right, an asymmetry pregnant with the risk of irresponsibility.

The first thing to note is that in formulating the relationship of the ‘I’ to the other person as one between ‘same’ and ‘other’ Levinas does not intend to suggest that the ‘I’ is somehow unchanging, constant, which would run against conceptions of the self from Heraclitus to Sartre, Nietzsche to Lacan. Rather, the ‘I’ is a becoming, it is changing, but when confronted with the other it becomes ‘same’ by virtue of the sense of its own identity. Levinas writes: ‘The I is not a being that always remains the same, but is the being whose existing consists in identifying itself, in recovering its identity throughout all that happens to it’ (ibid: 36). In other words, the sameness of the ‘I’ is a function of self-identity that cannot be extended to the other. Further, this relationship of the ‘I’ to the other should not be understood as a totality, as a ‘we’; the ‘I’ and the other are ‘absolutely separated’ (ibid: 35) because the other ‘is not wholly in my site’ (ibid: 39). The other eludes me and the relationship is without relation, in that there is an encounter with someone who can only ever be experienced as other (who bears no relation to me). An understanding of this relationship – an encounter with something beyond the ‘I’ – is crucial to understanding Levinas’ account of ethics and my use of it throughout the present work. He writes: ‘The strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I, to my

thoughts and my possession, is precisely accomplished as a calling into question of my spontaneity, as ethics' (ibid: 43). With this passage Levinas offers the reader two equivalences: first, the strangeness of the other person and our inability to understand the other person; and, second, the limitation of one's freedom (spontaneity) and ethics. Before we can better understand these couplings it is best to approach the nature of the encounter itself.

For Levinas, the relationship with another person is established through 'presence before a face' (ibid: 50). As he describes it: 'The way in which the other person presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face' (ibid). So the relationship is enacted in a face-to-face encounter and the face is the locus point of the encounter. On the one hand we have a simple idea, of people meeting people in the flesh with the face as the obviously important focal point (for identification, for communication both verbal and nonverbal); on the other hand, the face is at the same time a marker for the very otherness of the other person, a signifier that they are more than we can think, elusively strange. The face is an expression of exteriority: 'A presentation which consists in saying "It's me" – and nothing else to which one might be tempted to assimilate me' (Levinas 2007: 296); that is, it is a marker that the other escapes totality, resists the attempt to reduce the external to thought – an opening on to the idea of infinity. It is this latter role of the face that draws us towards ethics. If before the face we are in confrontation with something we cannot understand then we must act with responsibility lest we do harm. This is what Levinas calls 'a calling into question of my spontaneity':

It is the very revelation of a resistance to my powers that does not counter them as a greater force, but calls in question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being. Morality begins when freedom, instead of being justified by itself, feels itself to be arbitrary and violent (ibid: 84).

The inaccessibility of the other person – their irreducibility to thought; transcendence – means that we can never *know* them. We can never know the thoughts, motivations, desires, intentions, etc., of the other person. This means that our freedom is dangerous since our ability to act without such knowledge could result in suffering. The very fact that we possess freedom demands that we use it with responsibility for the outcome of

it, for how it might affect other people. ‘To welcome the Other is to put in question my freedom’ (ibid: 85); this is both an internal questioning and an external questioning. On the first count, we become aware that the unfettered exercise of our freedom is ‘murderous’ (ibid: 84), that it is harmful to the other, such that we become ashamed of our own freedom and reign it in. On the second count, this calling into question comes from without but in a subtle way; the other does not counter my freedom by a display of force, that is, I am not coerced or threatened into limiting my free actions by a show of power. Rather, the other is encountered as vulnerable – and this is expressed by the face. For Levinas, the face is naked; we do not cover the face, it is exposed (with the exception of burqas and balaclavas, which have, perhaps, the opposite effect of the naked face): ‘The nakedness of [the] face extends into the nakedness of the body that is cold and that is ashamed of its nakedness’ (ibid: 75). The face of the other, then, is a display of their vulnerability, the last nakedness that decency allows, that exposes to us the fragile nature of the human being. So, whilst the encounter with the other calls into question my powers, it does so from the vulnerable position of exposure rather than from a position of superior power. At the most fundamental level, the encounter with the other is a familiar commandment: ‘Thou shall not kill’. Through the exposure of the face there is a silent injunction not to do harm to this vulnerable other. The encounter with the other ‘is fundamentally pacific’ (ibid: 171), as the violent exertion of my power is shown to be unacceptable. (The relationship between encounters, violence, and freedom will be discussed in Chapters Six, Seven, and Nine.)

What we get from Levinas, then, is a conception of morality that works within an encounter between two people: the face-to-face. What makes Levinas’ account of ethics peculiar is that it is asymmetrical; there is no Golden Rule, no reassurance that if you behave responsibly towards others that in return they will do likewise for you. Since Levinas is concerned with how the ‘I’ encounters the other he stops at an ethics that works purely in the first-person: it always falls on the ‘I’ to be responsible and not on the other. Of course, if we broke out of the first-person perspective of this account it would be obvious that everyone is responsible for everyone else but since as human beings we can never have this ‘from the outside’ experience it is sufficient for Levinas to have described a responsibility that falls on the ‘I’ alone (i.e. from my perspective me; from your perspective you). Levinas writes: ‘To utter “I,” to affirm the irreducible

singularity in which the apology is pursued, means to possess a privileged place with regard to responsibilities for which no one can replace me and from which no one can release me. To be unable to shirk: this is the I' (ibid: 245). That is, responsibility is mine alone and no one can take my place, no one can perform my duty for me. Further, because responsibility is mine alone and is always responsibility for a singular other, the ethical relationship enacted in the encounter is a 'closed society' (ibid: 265): it exists between the 'I' and the other, one-to-one and face-to-face.

Here is the core argument of *Totality and Infinity* in a nutshell: 'The fact that in existing for another I exist otherwise than in existing for me is morality itself' (ibid: 261). I believe we should take all of this out of Levinas' register and into more familiar language and context, lest we are blinded by its sophistication and forever lose sight of the reality it speaks to. The face is crucial to our interactions with other people. It has been observed by psychologists (see Pronin 2008 for a review of the evidence) that there is an asymmetry inherent to face-to-face encounters. My use of such observations here is meant purely as an illustration rather than as an attempt to psychologise Levinas' work. I think this would be problematic in that psychology and psychotherapy would attempt, as John Heaton (2002) argues, to subsume the other in a system; psychotherapy, Heaton's specific target, would attempt to reach the other, not allowing them to remain other, through method – be it Freudian, Jungian, Kleinian, or otherwise. However, as Heaton demonstrates from his own experiences with patients as a therapist, the experience of the encounter with the other, as described by Levinas, can be understood from a crude psychological standpoint (i.e. we think about the other in ways that can be understood in Levinasian terms), which is what I want to develop here in order to illuminate this difficult work. Basically, we possess a lot more information about ourselves than we do about other people. When we are conversant with another person, say, we are fully aware of our thought processes, our intentions and our motivations, and we can understand the way we act upon these. That is, we are able to perceive of ourselves introspectively. However, we have no access to the thoughts, intentions, motivations, of the other person. As such, we have to perceive of the other in terms of extrospection, which is to say, in our attempts to understand their actions we make judgements based only on their outwards behaviour (and not – because it is not possible – on their thoughts, etc.); or by projection, inferring things about the other that

are closed to our perception by reference to our own thoughts and feelings. With extrospection, the face of the other takes on an importance; our own face is neither-here-nor-there since we rarely see it, whilst the other's face becomes a vital focus in our attempts to understand *where the other person is coming from*. This asymmetry becomes problematic because we assume that others can be judged by their external displays whilst we judge ourselves based on our interior thoughts. We can understand Levinas in these terms. The other person is closed off to us; the face is both the interactive locus and a sort of barrier, a limit to what we can experience of the other. If we behave as if our ignorance of the inner-life of the other person is anything more than an inadequacy of perspective then we will do harm to the other; that is, if we act as if this ignorance is sufficient to act without regard for what we are ignorant of then we are violent in our use of freedom. We cannot infer from the experience of introspection/extrospection that we can put ourselves before others. If we project an image of ourselves onto the other person, assume that they must think and feel as we do, then we are in a relationship with ourselves and have lost sight of the other, again exercising our own desires at the cost of the other person's; Levinas would call this sort of projection 'the imperialism of the same' (2007: 59). What is moral is to treat this fundamental ignorance – the way that the other exceeds my thoughts – as the beginning of moral behaviour, as a demand to limit one's spontaneousness, one's freedom. That is, when we behave with a sense of responsibility for our actions, we acknowledge that our ignorance of others should manifest itself as humility rather arrogance, as morality rather than egoism. The lesson of the experience of introspection/extrospection is that we should put the other person before ourselves.

At this point it is important to note that Levinas' conception of the face is not all that straightforward. He asks whether the 'epiphany' of the face – the experience described above as realising that the other person goes before me – is a sensible experience (ibid: 187): it is not (recall my comments above that this is not a Goffmanesque phenomenology of the face). For Levinas, vision relates to grasp, so to suggest that the epiphany of the face is sensible is to suggest that that which escapes the 'I' – the other – can be grasped, which is to say, is not other. He writes: 'The face is present in its refusal to be contained. In this sense it cannot be comprehended, that is, encompassed. It is neither seen nor touched – for in visual or tactile sensation the identity of the I envelops

the alterity of the object, which becomes precisely a content' (ibid: 194). The face is a resistance to my powers, it escapes my ability to see it, or at least, it transcends my ability to see it. The face is sensible and it is terrestrial, and it is important that it is such since it plays a practical role in responsibility. But the face is more than this, it transcends the fleshy world and takes us beyond it: 'The Other remains infinitely transcendent, infinitely foreign; his face in which his epiphany is produced and which appeals to me breaks with the world that can be common to us, whose virtualities are inscribed in our *nature* and developed by our existence' (ibid). So the face is a sort of terrestrial opening to a moral realm, beyond the self-concern of our own existence and the sorts of moral philosophies we derived from this and proclaimed to be natural. The face is encountered both as a visceral indicator of the other person and as an insensible demand to put the other person before me – and all this in a way that bypasses moral prescription, codes or rules.

With this in mind, and thinking back to Levinas' work in 'Reality and Its Shadow' (2006d), we can see that if the face is both and more than what can be seen then this would preclude its representation through image. That is, the face presents itself both as sensible and as moral yet when it is represented – which is to say, when it does not present itself – then all that remains is the sensible. This would once more be the 'imperialism of the same' since 'the object of representation is indeed interior to thought' (Levinas 2007: 123); that which is represented is made intelligible and so what is lost is the way that the face when presented in the encounter escapes me and encourages my responsibility. Representation, on the other hand, gives 'total freedom' to the 'I'; the 'I' can act towards the other person represented without restraint since such a representation is viewed at the individual's leisure. So, images are for 'enjoyment' and enjoyment is egoistic, without concern for the other person (ibid: 134). It must be borne in mind that for Levinas, '[t]he notion of the face differs from every represented content' (ibid: 177); 'the face never becomes an image or an imitation' (ibid: 297).

Finally, we should observe that in *Totality and Infinity* there are under-developed references to ideas that Levinas will go on to expand upon in his later work, of most relevance: the ethical significance of speech. Levinas suggests that the relationship with

the other is most profoundly one of conversation. When we engage the other in speech it is a form of interaction that allows the other to remain other: 'For the ethical relationship which subtends discourse is not a species of consciousness whose ray emanates from the I; it puts the I in question. This putting in question emanates from the other' (ibid: 195). What Levinas means is that conversation involves response; to maintain conversation one has to respond to what the interlocutor has previously said, which requires a certain responsibility towards fidelity to the other's expression. As such, conversation is deference to the other, putting the other person first. Again, we should link this back to Levinas' work on image; for Levinas, the face of the other speaks to me and I am called to respond – the image, though, is speechless. If seeing is imperial, in the Levinasian sense of reinforcing the same, then speech is moral: 'Speech cuts across vision' (ibid: 195), it takes us away from the same and into confrontation with the other. I find this to be, in *Totality and Infinity*, embryonic; the development of this approach to speech will be discussed presently.

### **2.3. Otherwise Than Being**

The title of the final text to be approached here, *Otherwise Than Being* (2008c), originally published in 1974, summarises well the approach taken by Levinas; by returning to considerations of the face-to-face, responsibility, and speech, Levinas' project is to present an alternative to philosophies (see Heidegger 2006) that posit being as a self-interested affair, arguing instead that existence is fundamentally *for others*. Discussing the book in interview, Levinas describes it as an argument for 'responsibility as the essential, primary and fundamental structure of subjectivity' (2009: 95).

Speech Levinas now divides into two forms: 'the said' and 'saying' (2008c: 5-7). Saying is a sort of exposure in speech, it puts the speaker in a vulnerable position whilst, as with the imperialism of the same, the said would dominate this saying. That said, we should resist the temptation to map 'the said' and 'saying' onto 'the same' and 'other'; whilst the said is an imposition of the same, saying is an approach to speech that is open to the 'I' (and so is not other). Saying is frankness and sincerity in speech, a willingness to respond faithfully to what the other person is saying. In dialogue,

understood as saying, the 'I' is on the back foot since she is beholden to respond to the other, she is guided not by her own inclinations but by a need to answer to the other person. This kind of shift in balance, from the 'I' to the other, should be familiar from *Totality and Infinity* as a sense of responsibility for the other. The said, on the other hand, would be a unilateral speech act, emanating from the 'I' and without due consideration for the other's place in the conversation or a response to the other that does not do justice to the way they have presented themselves in speech. It is worth exploring this in some detail since I wish to utilise this work in a discussion of Facebook status updates and Twitter tweets in Chapter Seven. A slightly ludicrous example should help to demonstrate all this but first a word of warning: it would be a narrow reading of Levinas to think that he is overly concerned with analysing the content of speech; rather, he is attempting to show how the form of conversation instantiates the primacy of the other and the responsibility of response. I will expand upon this shortly but first the example:

1. One-eyed midget: 'Now!'
2. Mister Jones: 'For what reason?'
3. One-eyed midget: 'How?'
4. Mister Jones: 'What does this mean?'
5. One-eyed midget: 'You're a cow; give me some milk or else go home.'

This is, of course, one of the bizarre exchanges from Bob Dylan's 'Ballad of a Thin Man' (2004: 175). The opening proposition (by the one-eyed midget) is presumably neutral whilst the first response (from Mister Jones) is an earnest attempt to engage with this strange proclamation; the third speech act is in no way an attempt to respond to the second; the fourth speech act sees another valiant attempt to engage with the preceding statement; and the fifth and final speech act not only makes no attempt to respond faithfully but is also unilateral. Mister Jones might wonder (as he does after a previous abortive attempt at conversation early in the song) whether he is utterly alone here. What we can say is that the second and fourth speech acts are saying whilst the third and fifth are the said; but, since the said dominates saying, the whole conversation collapses and lacks any intersubjective dimension such that the one-eyed midget is behaving as if solitary and Mister Jones is left feeling so, whereas, on the contrary, '[t]o



say is to approach a neighbour' (Levinas 2008c: 48). Again, I use this as an example of responsibility for the other in Levinas as played through speaking rather than as an example of how one would go about a study of responsibility (i.e. by examining the content of conversations). The real lesson here is one that emerges more explicitly in *Otherwise Than Being* than is found in *Totality and Infinity*, that responsibility is not just passive – thou shall not kill, one must not act as if alone in the world since there is the other person, one's freedom must be limited lest it do harm to others – but active: responsibility is also response. Just as in speech, where we must respond responsibly to the other, so too in the encounter, but this constitutes much more than simply speech acts. Whilst Levinas' account of the response of responsibility has a simple practical dimension to it, it is also motivated by some difficult philosophical arguments that will need to be navigated.

What emerges in *Otherwise Than Being* is a new approach to the face-to-face in terms now of *proximity*, a very specific idea of proximity, although the face retains the significance it is given in *Totality and Infinity*.<sup>6</sup> This is, I think, not only essential to understanding Levinas but also one of the elements of his work most open to challenge in a new media age, since proximity is today either transformed (into virtual proximity) or of lesser relevance to contemporary life thanks to advanced telecommunications, something that will be approached in different ways in each of the next five chapters. For Levinas, responsibility for the other becomes a response to the proximity of the other person. As with the idea of the face this proximity seems to be both literal and figural; it is at once both an exposure to the other person and the very responsibility we have for them. On this latter, figurative, aspect Levinas writes: 'Proximity is quite distinct from every other relationship, and has to be conceived as a responsibility for the other' or simply 'humanity' (2008c: 46). To be exposed to the other is to be exposed to her 'free initiatives' (ibid: 47), which, following the same argument from *Totality and Infinity*, initiates in me a sense of responsibility that those free initiatives not be crushed. Proximity is the nearness of a face, which is also to be exposed to the silent saying of the face, which expresses vulnerability. Now, all saying demands an appropriate response. What kind of response would do justice to this expression? For Levinas, one

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<sup>6</sup> It should also be noted that Levinas maintains his arguments against images of the face bearing an ethical content.

responds to the vulnerability of others by making oneself vulnerable in an attempt to make them stronger; one puts oneself in harm's way in place of the other person; one gives and one gives. To respond responsibly is to expose oneself to suffering, to wounding or sickness, in order to prevent the suffering of others; to open one's home to the homeless; to give the clothes from one's back or the food from one's mouth where it might alleviate the suffering of others. The response that is demanded is 'giving' as 'a tearing from oneself despite oneself' (ibid: 74). Giving, it should be noted, for Levinas means broadly a good act, a moral response. Proximity to the face, then, is a call to action – the silent saying of the face of the other.

Levinas refers frequently to the other person as the neighbour, with all the moral connotations one would expect. The neighbour encompasses both friends and strangers since they are all other to me; Levinas writes of 'the stranger in the neighbour' (ibid: 123), suggesting both that even those close to us (family, friends) remain other and, as a consequence, that one's obligation to those close (emotionally rather than in the sense of propinquity, although the two are likely to overlap) is no more or no less than that to strangers. 'In a sense nothing is more burdensome than a neighbor' (ibid: 88) writes Levinas – but why accept the burden, why respond to those who are worse off than us? Such a question is, for Levinas, misguided because there can be no answer as to why we help others; one should instead ask: what wretchedness must have befallen this person that they would need my help; how destitute must they be that they would turn to me? To be reduced to recourse to me, to need my help, is precisely why it is incumbent on me to offer it (ibid: 91).

Response is incumbent on me – and no-one can take my place. The encounter with the other 'divests me without stop of all that can be common to me and another man, who would thus be capable of replacing me. I am then called upon in my uniqueness as someone for whom no one else can substitute himself' (ibid: 59). That is to say, that since to encounter the other is to come face-to-face with otherness, to recognise that the other is absolutely other to me, one cannot maintain an equivalence between oneself and others. This, in turn, means that one is not interchangeable with others and that, when faced with the pressing need to alleviate the suffering of another person, there can be no demand that someone else steps in and does the moral work instead. Moral action

chooses me – and I cannot pass the buck. Further, the fact that the ‘I’ and the other are not interchangeable means that the relation to the other is without expectation of reciprocity: ‘The knot of subjectivity consists in going to the other without concerning oneself with his movement toward me’ (ibid: 84). Responding to the other must be done without consideration of what the other can do in return. Levinas: ‘The word *I* means *here I am*, answering for everything and for everyone’ (ibid: 112); only the ‘I’ is able to respond to a cry for help with the *here I am* (to help). Of course, we all say ‘I’ to ourselves but only I refer to myself as ‘I’ so, as far as I am concerned, the responsibility to respond is all mine. (This should be familiar from the above discussion of *Totality and Infinity*.) You can bring suffering on yourself, sacrifice yourself to help others but you cannot expect others to do it; Levinas, in good humour but in all seriousness, writes that ‘to say that the other has to sacrifice himself to the others would be to preach human sacrifice!’ (ibid: 126). One must, though, be prepared to make sacrifices for others, to take up the burden of the neighbour. Everywhere there is suffering that I must respond to such that responsibility is infinite; there is always suffering and it is always my responsibility.

At this point, I feel, it becomes necessary to address the question of religion as it relates to the work of Levinas. Terms such as ‘neighbour’ and expressions such as ‘here I am’ – which I will return to in Chapter Four in relation to the notion of ‘here’ in media (suffused) environments – in the context of ethics are loaded with Judaeo-Christian connotation. Levinas was a Talmudic scholar – a selection of his writings on the Talmud are collected together in the volume *Nine Talmudic Readings* (1994) – whilst, for example, *Difficult Freedom* (2011) demonstrates the explicit relation of his work to Judaism and Jewish philosophy. Is it possible to separate his ethical philosophy from his religious writing – and, more broadly, religion? I suggest that it is. As was declared in Chapter One and again at the outset of the present chapter, the work of Levinas is to be subject to an active reading, reworked, made to strain in a new context that will not allow it to remain unchanged. Levinas’ twin status as writer of philosophy and writer of religious works is not relevant here since the present project is not a work of scholarship on Levinas: it is an attempt to come to terms with the ethical dimensions of our new media age utilising theoretical resources, some of which are derived from Levinas. One might insist on the inseparability of Levinas’ philosophy and his Judaism and Jewish

thought/writings (Caygill 2002: 2-3) *if* the project at hand was to produce a piece of work about Levinas – which is not my intention here. Michel Foucault was once asked in interview about his relationship to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche; his reply:

I prefer to utilise the writers I like. The only valid tribute to thought such as Nietzsche's is precisely to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest. And if commentators then say that I am being faithful or unfaithful to Nietzsche, that is of absolutely no interest (1980: 53-54).

This bullish approach is precisely the correct way to go about using the theory or philosophy of others; it should be put to work, taken to its limits and then beyond. The question of Levinas' religiosity and its impact on his work is considered inconsequential so long as that work does not require the existence of God or adherence to religion for it to be rendered coherent. If there are traces of religious thought in Levinas' work then it does not bear on the use of his ideas about ethics insofar as they are traces and not of structural importance to his argument. The work of Levinas that I have presented so far in this chapter stands on its own and if it looks at times to bear the marks of religion then this is of no matter; this is familiar language to us and helps ground difficult philosophical arguments in a register more easily understood: it does no more than that, at least as I present it. One approach to the question of Levinas and religion would be, as a reader, to draw out where religion might be found in what are, on the face of it, philosophical texts (Boothroyd 2002: 15); this would be an enlightening activity but it is an approach that is inappropriate for the aims of the present work. To return to the sentiments of Foucault, in later chapters I will be taking the ideas of Levinas and subjecting them to the pressures of a new context, using them anew to understand new media events and environments; understanding the original context of these ideas is not part of this project and if I am unfaithful to the religious dimension of Levinas' work – or pass it over in silence – then this is of no interest considering the aims of my work. I take the following approach: the philosophical and the religious in the thought of Levinas are not separate *for Levinas* but can be separated without damage by those who would wish to use it after a Foucauldian fashion. This work will not pay homage to Levinas but take his work to the limits of application, until it becomes uncomfortable with itself and, ultimately, radically altered.

One of the things that recommends Levinas' ethical theory is that it allows us to understand responsibility, as the subtitle to the book *Nietzsche and Levinas* (2009) has it, "After the Death of a Certain God". Zygmunt Bauman (2009) turned to Levinas for an account of ethics that did not require the dissemination of norms from figures of authority or from institutions. We should include amongst these God and religion: with the death of God – when society no longer requires the existence of God – ethical theory must be rid of the mystical, even if it may retain certain elements of the language of religious morality or find value in its parables. This is a challenge since we find, especially in the New Testament, rather an attractive account of our responsibility to others and compelling illustrations such as the Parable of the Good Samaritan. The challenge, in a nutshell, is to conceive of responsibility as something that does not require ideas of Christian Love or the Grace of God. Levinas offers an account of responsibility that places the onus on the individual and that emanates from the other, 'such that responsibility may be said to be the very modality of my subjectivity' (Boothroyd 2009: 162). By building responsibility into the very notion of what subjectivity is, there is no longer a need for a God about whom there is no certainty. As Jill Stauffer (2009) argues, after the death of God we lose the authority that would have us behave responsibly towards others; and what Levinas offers is an account of responsibility where that burden is assumed by the individual. This presents a curiously paradoxical conception of freedom: responding to the other both is and is not freely chosen. Levinas declares that 'the Good is not presented to freedom; it has chosen me before I have chosen it. No one is good voluntarily' (2008c: 11). To encounter the other is to encounter a neighbour for whom I am responsible and this is a responsibility that is initiated despite me: 'I am ordered toward the face of the other' (ibid), a hostage to responsibility, compelled to respond. The 'toward' in this last passage should be considered an ethical term in Levinas' work: it is the 'towards' of 'being-towards-others', an ethical movement or gesture of responsibility – literally a response. All one can do is to endorse this command to direct oneself towards the other person, *amor fati*. If this sounds fatalistic then Levinas is quick to observe that 'if no one is good voluntarily, no one is enslaved to the good' (ibid); that is, since no one has a choice in the matter no one is a slave, since to be enslaved is the removal of freedom – and here there is none. Levinas writes: 'There is a paradox in responsibility, in that I am obliged without this obligation having begun in me, as though an order slipped into my

consciousness like a thief, smuggled itself in' (ibid: 13). The paradox is that the command to respond to the other is antecedent to freedom, such that we freely choose to obey it. It is impossible to escape one's responsibility for others and because of this we get the kinds of freely chosen responses that we applaud as morally good: 'It is through the condition of being hostage that there can be in the world pity, compassion, pardon and proximity – even the little there is, even the simple "After you, sir"' (ibid: 117). We are responsible for the other against our will, called to respond; but that response is one that we must freely choose. If we are ordered towards the face of the other then it is both an order we must follow and one that we must choose to follow.<sup>7</sup>

#### **2.4. Initial Reflections on Levinas in a New Media Age**

What we get from Levinas, then, is an account of ethics in which responsibility is endless and unavoidable; always mine and never the other's; always between myself and the other person (where the other person comes first) – and, it is important to note, without any guidance as to how to go about the act of responding, beyond the simple injunction to alleviate suffering where it is encountered. What Levinas presents is not a moral philosophy in the traditional sense – made of categorical imperatives or principles of utility or codified prescriptions – but instead something that accurately describes the reality of moral life. We talk loosely of moral minefields or moral mazes, and wistfully of moral compasses; it is the very messiness of moral reality that precludes accurate passage through it. Levinas' triumph is not to describe moral life as it ought to be but as it is: lonely, confusing, full of errors and indecision, of competing demands that are never exhausted.

There is much in Levinas' account that suggests it is appropriate for understanding our new media age. With the proliferation of new media the individual finds the world at her fingertips; no longer a passive receiver of information she can seek it out for herself: gone is the reliance on a top-down distribution of news. This puts the individual in the

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<sup>7</sup> I do not think that this is problematically paradoxical. For example, the Geneva Convention recognises that orders and freedom co-exist, hence one is obligated to disobey those that would lead, say, to genocide. If this is possible then it is equally plausible to suggest that freedom is exercised in choosing to obey orders.

driving-seat and so an account of ethics that emphasises the prominent role of the individual in moral responsibility is desirable. So is one without recourse to moral authority; since the individual is now greater able to expand her moral awareness it seems less likely that universal moral codes would be sought. Now that we can discover more suffering, wherever it happens, for ourselves it seems likely that political solutions are bypassed in favour of moral solutions and that the emphasis on this individualising process would lend itself less favourably to traditional moral prescriptions which are, at bottom, group norms. With the emphasis now on the individual it seems more appropriate to conceive of moral action as something one has to work out for oneself rather than as something that should be guided by others. Especially since the kinds of relationship afforded by new media are often private: direct communication with no concern for distance creates intimate relationships, and so an ethics that speaks to such an intimate society – one-to-one – is more likely to bear a resemblance to moral life in a new media age (than, say, utilitarianism which would demand that you conceptually removed yourself from this relationship in order to factor in the greatest number). With the proliferation of channels of information comes the possibility of achieving *personal* relationships with a greater number of people. At the same time, this recommends an account of ethics that understands the moral value in speech.

So, there are plenty of theoretical resources here to put to work in a new media age – as I will do throughout the rest of this work – but there are also elements that immediately appear to strain too much in the contemporary milieu. Levinas dismisses the idea that images are morally evocative and yet new media present to individuals countless images of others, through webcams, Flickr, YouTube, and social networking sites such as Facebook. Our encounters with others increasingly take place in environments where images stand-in for people, and so it would seem too strict a limitation to reserve ethical encounters for moments of physical proximity, of literal face-to-face interactions. As such, in Chapter Three I will argue that we must also find a way to ground the ethical encounter in avatar interaction, a form of communication mediated by various kinds of graphical proxies. Further, it is not simply one-to-one, bilateral communication that is marked by the surrogacy of the image for the person; global events are presented to distant witnesses and so the ‘here I am’ of Levinas’ moral agent must be explored in relation to this seeing-at-a-distance: what can we say of the responsibility to alleviate

suffering when that suffering is geographically beyond our reach? Similarly, acting-at-a-distance is facilitated by the vast networks that span the globe; wither responsibility when the results of action are distant and, perhaps, unseen? Chapter Four will explore these questions. Not only must we introduce the ethical role of images but so too the ethical significance of the event that is presented to us; Levinas is silent on this matter and yet media coverage of events that presents the suffering of many – terrorist attacks, natural disasters, violent revolutions – most frequently dominates the channels of communication, from rolling news to Twitter. An ethics of the event – and not just of the intimate face-to-face relation – is required, and will be articulated in Chapter Five. Levinas’ account of the ethical encounter, as well as being founded on a pre-ontological account of intersubjectivity, has an empirical dimension which needs to be situated in the environments we inhabit today. The public spaces of the city are subject to increasing privatisation and gating; in Chapter Six I will argue that we must adopt a darker reading of the nature of the other, if we are to make sense of the self-referential ways in which urban and new media technologies are manipulated to foreclose the possibility of random encounters. If the kinds of encounters that Levinas envisaged bearing an ethical nature were very much ‘offline’ then we must also examine the ways that we encounter and interact with other people online, in order to ascertain what might be different – which is approached in Chapter Seven. Finally, these environments contain non-human as well as human actors – smart softwares that interact with humans and make decisions – and these need to be factored into ethical thinking; Levinas, however, does not recognise objects as agents and so this will need to be explored in Chapter Eight. Levinas offers much to guide the discussion but we must go beyond him if we are to understand the ethical dimensions of the new media age.



### 3. AVATAR ETHICS

Since Neal Stephenson first used the term in his cyberpunk novel *Snow Crash* (2002), originally published in 1992, 'avatar' has become widely employed to define the sign through which we socialise online. Mathias Klang writes: 'The online character is often seen as a reflection of the offline self and is in literature referred to as the avatar since it is a manifestation of the self in this online world' (2004: 390). ('Avatar' comes from the Sanskrit meaning manifestation of God.) Stephen Webb (2001) offered an early analysis of the avatar used in Virtual Places, a now defunct chat site, with the avatars in question being simply photographs, cartoons, or animations of users. David J. Gunkel (2010: 128) works with a definition of avatar so broad that it could conceivably include any form of identification online, from the Google+ constellation of 'circles', 'sparks', 'hangouts', and 'photos' to merely the username used in an instant messaging application such as BlackBerry Messenger (BBM). For Gunkel, an avatar is simply a representation of the user that can be interacted with by other users. What all these accounts – and many more – have in common is that they conceive of the avatar as a social entity utilised in social environments. It is through avatars that we socialise online, maintaining friendships, conversations, or shared interests (such as playing games or sharing hobbies).

Such definitions of avatars are broad and so I think we should look to some of the more popular social sites online (at the time of writing) in order to pick out some specific kinds that will give us more precise definitions. First, through Second Life, is the animated avatar that moves through three-dimensional, graphically rendered social environments. Second, through Skype, is the web-cam presentation of self. This, I maintain, is just as much an avatar as that used in Second Life since for the user their own image is present on the screen and for the interlocutor that user is manifest in the screen: from both perspectives there is a separation of user and the image of the user such that the latter stands-in as an avatar. Third, through Facebook, we get the profile avatar which presents the user through a photograph but also through information – both dead and live. The dead information – name, age, lists of hobbies, favourite films, etc. – creates a focal point whilst the live information – status updates, wall posts, instant messaging – allows for the act of self-expression. Falk Heinrich introduces the idea of

the portrait avatar which he defines, simply, as ‘a digital picture of, or by the user, used as an avatar in social online domains’ (2010: 4). His example of this is the Facebook profile picture but I think this fails to take into account the importance of the text contained on the Facebook profile. More apposite, and the final kind I wish to present, would be the Twitter ‘avatar’ (the name users of Twitter give to the image) so long as we also include as part of the portrait – like the caption under a painting in a gallery – the one-hundred-and-forty-character tweet that goes with it. This should be seen as distinct from the Facebook profile since the amount of dead information is massively reduced such that the focal point is the photograph and the fleeting tweet. These four – animated avatar, web-cam avatar, profile avatar, and portrait avatar – together provide the definition of avatar with which I am here concerned.

In what follows I will explore how we can ground the notion of ethical encounter online through avatars. As was explored in the previous chapter, Emmanuel Levinas’ rejection of image is limited if we are to understand responsibility today, when so much of our awareness of others is gleaned from new media sources. First, I will argue that avatars as images are morally provoking, by turning to the aesthetic theory of Aristotle (and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s return to this classic exploration of art) and Immanuel Kant. Since image is so unsatisfactorily approached in Levinas’ ethics, the move to aesthetics is motivated by the need to draw more appropriate conclusions about image and moral responsibility in an environment where encounters with others are mediated by avatars. Whilst the focus here is specifically on avatar images the conclusions drawn will have a wider application to media presentations of others that will be explored in the following two chapters. Second, I will argue that avatars as extensions of the self allow for an ethical encounter to occur between two users. This work is purely of relevance to the avatar question since my concern is with grounding an encounter between users. This demands a return to theories of signification and I will conclude by appropriating from Jean-François Lyotard the notion of the tensor, a kind of sign that allows for a visceral meeting of bodies, but emphasising a moral dimension lacking in Lyotard’s radical account of signification by reading it alongside Levinas’ ethical theory. This will give us a theoretical underpinning for the idea that encounters take place online and – crucially for the present work – that these encounters are sufficient to ground moral responsibility without physical proximity.

### 3.1. Interface Simulacrum

Whilst it may appear, on the face of it, unproblematic that two users can encounter and interact with one another online through avatars, a closer examination of the relationship between the user and their avatar, as well as the nature of that interactivity, raises initial problems. This dynamic has been clearly explained by Slavoj Žižek (1999) who counters the idea that the Internet offers unlimited freedom – of association, of self-expression, of identity – with the simple observation that we can never escape the need for a representation of ourselves online (avatar) that can never fully represent us. The user, he argues, is passive, allowing another, an ‘interface simulacrum’ (ibid: 109), to stand in for them in interaction. Mediated interaction, therefore, is itself passive. This problem extends to the intersubjective, since the other user one would interact with is also inadequately represented by her avatar. So, not only is the user limited by their avatar but they cannot encounter the other user since she is similarly related to her own avatar, leading Žižek to conclude: ‘The other is thus purely virtual: no longer a true, living, intersubjective other, but an inanimate screen, a stand-in’ (ibid: 107). The nature of the interface – between avatars, via a computer or mobile device screen – ‘means that my relationship to the Other is never *face-to-face*’ (ibid: 113). We never really encounter the other, just the manipulated and fabricated signals sent through a computer (ibid: 108). Shanyang Zhao and David Elesh (2008: 570) make a similar point, arguing that without the face-to-face there is merely co-location and not co-presence, being-alongside rather than being-with.

Both Žižek and Zhao and Elesh’s arguments here prove problematic for the enduring force of the ethical theory of Levinas. It is precisely in the face-to-face that Levinas grounds responsibility, this notion of responsibility constituting being-with (or being-for) rather than mere being-alongside. For Levinas (2007: 35), the face-to-face encounter with the other person (‘other’) puts the individual (the ‘I’) in a relation with infinity. In simple terms, the ‘I’ is confronted by something (the other) which escapes her ability to fully comprehend, meaning that it cannot be totalised in thought – there is always something that cannot be known (infinity). Levinas writes: ‘The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face’ (ibid: 50). That is to say that it is the face of the other that expresses this infinite

dimension, the face of the other that makes the 'I' aware that what is before her is something beyond her control – something that resists her. What this expression of infinity – of complete otherness – conveys then, is that before the 'I' is another being whose motives and desires remain opaque and so to whom I should act in a way that does not do violence to those hidden intentions. Levinas calls this the 'calling into question of my spontaneity', that is, the imposition of limitations on one's own freedom or, simply, 'ethics' (ibid: 43).

Whilst on one level this encounter with the other leads the 'I' to act with a sense of responsibility as to how those actions impact upon the other, on another level responsibility becomes more active – it becomes response. The face is always expressive of the need for responsibility towards the other but when it becomes expressive of suffering it becomes a call to the 'I' to respond in some way to expiate this suffering, to take responsibility for the alleviation of that suffering. The suffering expressed by the face of the other 'imposes on me and I cannot stay deaf to its appeal, or forget it, [...] I cannot stop being responsible for [the other's] desolation' (Levinas 2006c: 32). For Levinas, the mute expression of the face is fundamentally moving but he also sees the dialogic call for help as being a profound ethical event, revealing the other in all her vulnerable otherness whilst at the same time demanding a response (Levinas 2007: 187-193). This response is spontaneous in the sense that it occurs in the moment; Levinas' is an anti-foundational ethics in that it does not operate on moral prescriptions – or even judgement. First, any sort of moral guidance would be general – pertaining to the same – rather than suitable for the specific other who is in need; and second, given the fundamental aloofness of the other we can never know that the way we respond is correct or possess any knowledge from which to judge the right course of action. So the encounter with the other arouses the goodness of the 'I' (Levinas 2007: 200) in the moment and response must be immediate, both temporally and in the sense of without recourse to moral mediation or advice. This kind of response is the 'gesture' of ethics (ibid: 174).

So we see that if the avatar is merely an 'interface simulacrum' (Žižek 1999: 109) and the face-to-face impossible online, then we cannot ground the Levinasian ethics of encounter through avatar interaction. There would be no other person present (so no

face, only a simulacrum) and no encounter; no responsibility evoked and no response possible. In what follows I will address these two concerns in turn but first I will return to some of the objections raised, in the previous chapter, to Levinas' arguments against image; I will argue not only that the avatar renders Levinas' position undesirable but that image in general must be rehabilitated into ethical theory.

### 3.2. Image

Whilst Julia Hell (2010: 145) has noted, and Zygmunt Bauman (in Dawes 2011: 131) has confirmed, that there is a connection, in Levinas, between looking at the other and being moved to respond to the other, Levinas himself saw limitations to this specular dimension of ethics. Across both his *Totality and Infinity* (2007) and *Otherwise Than Being* (2008c) Levinas argues that the face of the other – so vital for ethical encounters – cannot be represented as an image. The face is the focal point of the expression of otherness but for something to be represented is for it to be made intelligible – and what is made intelligible no longer remains as other. As stated in the previous chapter, Levinas calls this the 'imperialism of the same' (2007: 59), a totalising process. Since Levinas' ethics is based on the encounter with the other as other, anything that would translate this otherness into an intelligible same cannot be part of the moral realm. This, for Levinas, includes images of the other – which is problematic for any of the four kinds of avatar we are presently concerned with.

This abstract philosophical argument is supplemented by Levinas with some more grounded observations in his essay 'Reality and its Shadow' (2006d) (this was covered in greater detail in the previous chapter but it is worth returning to the salient points before going further). Levinas' focus in this piece is on art but the conclusions he draws here are, I suggest, responsible for the *tout court* dismissal of the value of images in his two major works of ethics. He writes: 'The most elementary procedure of art consists in substituting for the object its image' (ibid: 3); in turn, the image 'neutralizes' the object (ibid). Any object turned into an image becomes a non-object, a sensation. It resembles the object, like a shadow or an 'allegory of being' (ibid: 6). In an artwork, says Levinas, the presence of that which resembles the object – the spots of colour or slabs of marble

– only serve to point to the absence of the object. For Levinas, the image of the other is a sign that the other is not there, that there can be no encounter with this absent other. Whereas the face of the other presents only itself to the ‘I’ in the encounter, opening up a moral relationship, the image of the other is a representation, a shadow, an allegory – a non-other.

Additionally, for Levinas, there is something troubling about this image of the (absent) other. He writes: ‘every image is in the last analysis plastic, and [...] every artwork is in the end a statue – a stoppage of time, or rather its delay behind itself’ (ibid: 8). In the statuesque image, ‘an instant endures infinitely’ (ibid: 9). So, for example, ‘the Mona Lisa will smile eternally’ but it is a smile that never broadens (ibid). In this suspended instant nothing can ever happen. This has two effects: first, the ‘I’ cannot respond spontaneously to the image of the other because such a response has a temporal dimension which is here frozen; and second, the frozen image of the other is incapable of expression (Robbins 1999: 84). Like the Mona Lisa’s smile, the expression of the face will never fully form and the words to which the ‘I’ would respond are stuck in a mouth that cannot speak. There is nothing for the ‘I’ to respond to; the image has no ethical function.

These, then, are the three arguments that Levinas puts forward to dismiss images of the other: first, they translate otherness into the same; second, their presence highlights only the absence of the other; and, finally, their frozen quality makes impossible response. I do not think any of these arguments are today tenable. Taking them in reverse order, it is obvious that the four kinds of avatar discussed above return expression to the image. The web-cam avatar presents a face fully capable of expressions both gestural and verbal; the animated avatar is not frozen and although it is not as fully as expressive as the web-cam avatar, the use of text-based chat or speech through a microphone returns what Jill Robbins calls the ‘language-response to the other’ (1999: 54); both profile and portrait avatars do indeed contain frozen images but they also allow for language-response through text which, since the image is the focal point and not the entirety, is indissociable from the avatar. Levinas’ other two arguments deserve closer attention and in what follows I will first utilise the aesthetics of Aristotle and Hans-Georg Gadamer to argue that, whilst the other is absent in the image, there is a gesture of moral

responsibility; and, second, through Immanuel Kant's analytic of the sublime, I will argue that the unintelligible – otherness – *can* be presented through the image. Whilst this is not to say that the encounter with the avatar is an encounter with the user of that avatar, it will allow us to ground ethics online and later this will be expanded to the ethical encounter proper.

### *3.2.1. Imitation and Gesture*

Aristotle's famous consideration of art and literature in his *Poetics* (1997) was written in response to Plato's dismissive account of art as imitation in his *Republic* (1997). Plato's argument was that art was doubly inferior, since it was an imitation of something that was an imitation (the sensible world) of the real thing (the forms). Aristotle took this notion of imitation and explored what value it might have to those who contemplate art. He argued that it is through imitation that we learn – as children learn through imitation play – and so through the imitation of something in art we learn about the thing that is imitated. Aristotle writes that 'the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, "Ah, that is he."' (1997: 6). This last part – the 'Ah, that is he' – is both vital to our present study of avatars and a little misleading. For it is not the person depicted that we learn about but of the actions and character of people. In art, people are depicted morally better than in real life (Polygnotus), worse than in real life (Pauson) or true to life (Dionysius) (ibid: 3). At the same time, whilst these three artists depict moral character and action, some works of art have no ethical quality (ibid: 12). So, not all images have an ethical function which is to say, for Aristotle, that not all images are educative of character. In those paintings that do have an ethical function, regardless of their trueness to life or not, lessons are learned about moral decisions: 'Character is that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids' (ibid: 13). Whilst those paintings that exaggerate moral character are obviously fictive, the function they play is not so much in depicting things as they are or as they are perceived to be but how they *ought* to be (ibid: 53). So contemplation of a painting that depicts moral heroism or failing educates about what ought to be done whilst scenes of suffering arouse pity: in short, art can be ethical (ibid: 49) and our experience of things

imitated is no less powerful than of things themselves (ibid: 5-6). (We will return to these themes in Chapter Five through a discussion of media events.)

Whilst the work of Aristotle shows that art was regarded as possessing an ethical quality early in the Western philosophical tradition, it is Gadamer's reassessment of this work that begins to challenge Levinas' dismissal of images. Gadamer (1986c) indirectly approaches Levinas' concern for 'the speechless image' by arguing that although the image of a person is incapable of speech, there is nevertheless a kind of language: a gesture. Returning to the Aristotelean account of imitation, Gadamer (1986a: 99) argues that mimesis makes something present, allowing us to recognise something we have already encountered. It is through art, then, that our familiarity with the world is deepened (ibid: 100); art is a way of maintaining familiarity with a world that is 'dissolving' all around us (ibid: 104). However, art is not a depiction of an actual event but a 'gesture' that presents the being of the event (Gadamer 1986b: 79). For example – Gadamer's example – Werner Scholz's painting *Antigone* is not a depiction of the person named Antigone but a gesture representing self-chosen death. Symbolic gestures are embedded in the canvas; even when they represent humans the gesture remains just the art work – but gesturing towards human reality, towards the inner life of human subjectivity (ibid: 81). This is only ever a gesture since if the artist could express this in a more robust manner – codify it, say – then they would not need to create the art work. 'The images before us present human life in the language of heraldic emblems and devices' (ibid); and through them we encounter the unfamiliar. Reflecting on modern art, Gadamer writes: 'Even the art of our own time, whose mute gaze presents us with such disturbing enigmas, remains a kind of recognition: in such art we encounter the undecipherability of our surroundings' (ibid: 74).

We are now in a position to challenge Levinas' contention that images are not ethical in their nature. What Aristotle and Gadamer demonstrate is that images teach us about moral responsibility. Not all images, obviously, but where, say, human suffering is depicted in a photograph it renews in the instant of viewing the idea within us that the suffering of others is unacceptable. Of course, Levinas' antifoundational ethics has no place for indoctrination of values or the learning of moral lessons: ethics is a spontaneous response to the other. But what Aristotle and Gadamer are arguing is not



that we can read from images a prescription but rather that we gain a familiarity with the moral world – in the same way that we would through face-to-face encounters in Levinas’ account. Gadamer’s observation, that our familiarity with a world dissolving around us is maintained through art, is particularly interesting in this respect. Bauman, in his *Modernity and the Holocaust* (2007), warned of the disappearance of Levinas’ other through bureaucracy and technology; and what we cannot be aware of we cannot be responsible for. Today, when technological interaction takes place with physically absent others, it is through the image – amongst other things – that we maintain a grip on the reality of the world, a world in which the suffering of others is rife. Some images – not all, as Aristotle noted – gesture towards how we ought to behave towards people. Levinas is too hasty in his critique of images; if, for Levinas, human suffering and the causing of human suffering is inexcusable, then images that might convey this as a universal message should not be so readily dismissed as being outside of ethics. If we adopt the Aristotle/Gadamer approach then we lose nothing of value from Levinas’ account and yet gain a more useful conception of the image for ethical theory.

### 3.2.2. *The Sublime*

Once the image is shown to be of ethical significance we can begin to argue that avatar interaction constitutes an ethical encounter. However, just as one hurdle is cleared another bears down: through Gadamer we can say that images can have an ethical function – but it lacks any urgency. First, such images are viewed at the leisure of the viewer, or, at least on the viewer’s own terms. Second, the universality of the message risks passivity – ‘of course, *all* suffering is wrong but what can I do about it?’ – because it totalises all people and, in so doing, loses sight of the specific other. There is, in short, no demand, no imperative to leave one’s comfort-zone and go out and do anything about human suffering. Now, Gadamer, when he claims that art allows for an encounter with the undecipherable, is alluding to the notion of the sublime. In closing this section I will explore the idea that the other evokes a feeling akin to that of the sublime and that images that can gesture towards that teach us about our relationship to the infinite and so our own responsibilities towards the other.

Kant defines the sublime as ‘a representation of *limitlessness*’ (2008: 75), which is to say that, unlike the beautiful, which is about quality, the sublime is about quantity. ‘*Sublime* is the name given to what is *absolutely* great’ (ibid: 78); absolutely great here means great beyond all comprehension, ‘a greatness comparable to itself alone’ (ibid). Chaos, disorder and desolation, in so far as their magnitude and power is sufficient, excite the idea of the sublime, which ‘contravene[s] the ends of our power of judgement’ and ‘do[es] violence, as it were, to the imagination’ (ibid: 76). That is, the absolutely great cannot be contained in thought and so any attempt to bear it in mind is painful; or: ‘This excess for the imagination [...] is like an abyss in which it fears to lose itself’ (ibid: 88). We can have no control over the might of the sublime object through our minds; the sublime resists ‘the interest of the senses’ (ibid: 97). Whilst this sublime cannot be presented adequately to the mind, that very inadequacy is brought to mind, and so the sublime repels with its violence but also attracts with its capacity to show to the individual the mind’s limits: ‘a negative pleasure’ (ibid: 76), both pleasure and displeasure at once. It is important to note that whilst something like beauty exists in the world – that is, there are things that are beautiful – the sublime is found only in our ideas (ibid: 80).

This much is well known. Kant goes on to argue, intriguingly, that whatever it is that evokes the sublime feeling inspires respect whilst ‘humility [...] is a sublime temper of the mind’ (ibid: 94). Since the sublime cannot present itself to the senses there can be no comprehension, only respect and humility: ‘the sublime [prepares us] to esteem something highly even in opposition to our (sensuous) interest’ (ibid: 98). Without this the sublime would be merely terrifying (ibid: 95). Not that we get any commands as to how we ought to judge when faced with the sublime; there are no rules for judging nor is there any *telos* or end that can be ascertained and worked towards. Since the sublime feeling is the ‘thrusting aside of the sensible barriers’ we have only a ‘presentation of the infinite’ (ibid: 104). In the face of this infinite the only good that can come of it is enthusiasm – the attempt to bear witness to this unrepresentable – which Kant classifies as a sublime state of mind (ibid: 102). In this way, through humility and enthusiasm, reason can go beyond itself and into the infinite (ibid: 95).

Utilising the tools of aesthetics but within the genre of ethical theory will allow me to explain morality through images; what I want to suggest is that the Levinasian other evokes a feeling akin to the sublime when encountered by the 'I'. Levinas' other is fundamentally unknowable. We cannot comprehend the other *as other* because comprehension would involve the ability to take possession of in thought – and otherness so taken possession of can no longer be other. The encounter brings us face-to-face with an abyss of otherness that resists the mind's attempts to contain it, thus showing the limitation of the capacity of thought. We are forced beyond totality and into infinity. Levinas writes: 'In the idea of the Infinite, thought thinks more than it can contain' (2008a: 117). This would be a very fine definition of the sublime feeling. Bearing in mind that the sublime feeling exists in ideas and not in nature, I propose the following: just as a painting of a vast mountain range evokes the sublime feeling felt by the sheer magnitude of that range in nature, so too does the image of the other evoke the idea of the infinite experienced in the face-to-face encounter. The problem with Gadamer's account was that it offered a sort of universal responsibility that does not tally with Levinas' ethics. It was too totalising in its approach to responsibility, which would treat all others as a homogenised same. Now, though, if we combine the idea of the image as gesturing, of teaching us about the world, with the sublime, we can say that where images depict other people they remind us of the singularity of the other, the way the other escapes totality: the infinite. The image of another person reminds us of how, in the encounter, thought is forced to think more than it can contain, that something escapes it. It reminds the viewer that that which escapes thought – the other – is beyond her, that she cannot act with unlimited freedom lest it harm others. This, we might say, is a sort of *moral humility*. An image of another person, including avatars, is a gesture towards the responsibility we have not to act as if alone in the world.

However, this kind of gesture – a morality lesson – is not the same as the ethical gesture of taking responsibility for the other; being reminded of the encounter with the other through an image is not the same as the actual encounter. In the encounter, we are forced to think through our response to the other without rules or guidance (because every other is absolutely other and so no rules could pertain universally), to judge (i.e.

to make moral decisions) without criteria of judgement – what we might call *moral enthusiasm*.<sup>8</sup>

### 3.3. Sign

With this account of moral humility through images we have taken a first step towards giving avatar interaction the nature of an ethical encounter; we have unlocked the door – but we cannot yet walk through it. If we understood avatars purely in the terms outlined above then they would still be what Žižek called interface simulacra; ethically significant, yes, but disconnected from what they represent. The image would have to be a sign and it would have to be robustly connected to what it signified for us to conclude that to encounter it is to encounter the signified itself. If we are to say that ethical encounters between specific people can occur through online environments we need to be able to conceptualise the avatar as just such a sign. That way, to encounter a user’s avatar would be to encounter that user at the same time, with all the ethical significance that Levinas imbues. In what follows, I will explore the viability of grounding the encounter through forms of signification, dismissing both the index and the icon but taking from these wrong-turns guidance towards what I think is the most satisfactory solution to our problem: the avatar as tensor.

#### 3.3.1. Index

Ken Hillis, in his *Online a Lot of the Time* (2009), deploys a Peircian notion of index in order to explain the relation of the avatar to the user. It is worth returning to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce on the trichotomy of signs in order to see why this does not work. For Peirce (1955: 99-100) a sign is that which stands in for something (an object) for someone (the person the sign addresses). This sign then creates in the mind of that person another sign: an idea. This idea is an interpretation of the sign and stands in for the object in the same way as the sign does. Crucially, a sign, for Peirce, can only represent the object; the sign cannot give the person recognition of that object.

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<sup>8</sup> The purpose in this subsection has not been to argue that there is an equivalence between moral judgement and aesthetic judgement but, rather, that there is an equivalence between the sublime feeling and the idea of the infinite.

This broad definition of sign is then split into three kinds: icons, indices, and symbols. In Peirce's words: 'An *Icon* is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes merely by virtue of characters of its own' (ibid: 102), which is to say that an icon is a substitute that represents its object by similarity or mimicry but the object need not actually exist. 'An *Index* is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of being really affected by that Object' (ibid); an index has qualities in common with the object such that it refers back to it. Indices do not have a significant resemblance to their object but they direct attention to the object itself. An index has a 'dynamical (including spatial) connection both with the individual object, on the one hand, and with the senses or memory of the person for whom it serves as a sign, on the other hand' (ibid: 107). An index would lose all meaning if its object ceased to exist – but not if there was no-one present to interpret it. Finally: 'A *Symbol* is a sign which refers to the Object that it denotes by virtue of a law, usually an association of general ideas, which operates to cause the Symbol to be interpreted as referring to that Object' (ibid: 102). A symbol would cease to have meaning if there was no-one present to interpret it.

Discounting symbols, since they pertain to laws, we might suggest that the avatar is either an icon or an index, that is, that it either refers to the user by resembling the user or that it points back to the user by virtue of being somehow connected to the user. Peirce's elaboration on these two signs in particular should highlight the distinction:

The Icon has no dynamical connection with the object it represents; it simply happens that its qualities resemble those of that object, and excite analogous sensations in the mind for which it is a likeness. But it really stands unconnected with them. The Index is physically connected with its object; they make an organic pair, but the interpreting mind has nothing to do with the connection, except remarking it, after it is established (ibid: 114).

We can see then that the avatar cannot be classified as an icon (in the Peircean sense) if we wish to hold that encounters with avatars are also encounters with their users. There is no connection between icon and object – avatar and user – if we adopt the avatar-as-icon: there is only resemblance. This is presumably why Hillis (2009: 105-109) ignores icons and adopts the index as the sign of the user online. The avatar-as-index would point back to the user, like a sign-post, fulfilling our desire for the presence of

whomever we communicate with online (ibid: 109). Peirce noted that photographs were not mere resemblances – icons – but rather indices; this was precisely Susan Sontag’s (2008: 9) point when she claimed that a photograph, by presenting the absence of the photographed, pointed to their presence elsewhere. Yet it is far from clear that the notion of index in the avatar context really does give us a ‘metaphysics of presence’, as Hillis (2009: 109) puts it. The very fact that there needs to be a sign demonstrates that the user is not herself encountered. What we would get from the index understanding of avatar is merely a sign-post that points us in the direction of an encounter that is yet to come. Jean-François Lyotard’s famous critique of Peirce’s notion of the sign, in his *Libidinal Economy* (2004b), is telling in the avatar context. If we follow semioticians such as Peirce, writes Lyotard, then we get the following situation: ‘signification itself is constituted by signs alone [...] it comes on endlessly [...] we never have anything but references [...] signification is always deferred, meaning is never present in flesh and blood’ (ibid: 43). Lyotard laments: ‘See what you have done: the material is immediately annihilated’ (ibid). Peirce’s trichotomy of signs is a ‘semiotic nihilism’ (ibid: 45) or the ‘despair of lost-postponed meaning’ (ibid: 46) in that meaning is always deferred in an endless series of signs – giving us the sort of nihilism, the deferral of the worldly, that Friedrich Nietzsche persistently railed against. If we apply Peircean indices to avatars then someone is replaced by something and the meaningful encounter with that someone must be deferred.

### 3.3.2. *Icon*

If index is unsatisfactory for grounding the encounter through avatars then perhaps returning to a different conception of icon might point us in the right direction. In his discussion of avatars, Heinrich (2010) draws comparisons with the Byzantine icon (hereafter just ‘icon’) in order to demonstrate that our troubles pinning down the relation between avatar and user stem from a ‘Western semiotic divide between representational fiction and material reality proper’ (ibid: 4). He motivates this comparison by arguing that the digital image used on, for example, Facebook as an avatar has shifted from having a reflective function to a performative function (ibid). That is to say, that we may no longer be able to hold, with such images, a distinction between depicted and depiction.

Icons were depictions of holy characters – such as saints, Christ, the Virgin Mary – that worked both as representation and presentation. For the believer, displaying veneration towards the icon was at the same time to venerate the religious character depicted, such that the icon was both image and materialisation of that figure. The image then is held to be real, such that the distinction between the icon and the saint is collapsed. This relationship was then excluded from the Western viewpoint as Renaissance conceptions of art – with a division between reality and media – took hold. Heinrich (ibid: 6) explains that with the icon the depicted emerges from the picture and into the material realm of the faithful viewer, projected outwards into their material space. This, he contends, is one way in which we might understand the avatar. The user would emerge into the online environment and interact with the other user's avatar; and, the reverse, the other user would emerge into that environment and interact with the user's avatar. However, as Heinrich (ibid: 8) perceptively points out, this means the interaction is not between two users but between the user and the other avatar and the other user and the user's avatar. This is problematic for a notion of ethical encounters between users online. Heinrich concludes that we are forced to believe that the other avatar is really the other user, just as the worshipper must believe that the icon is really the saint. There is a certain amount of faith, he argues, in the reliability of data transmissions through the Internet.

This is unsatisfactory, and not purely, I hope, because of Western bias or scepticism towards faith: an ethical encounter, as Levinas describes it, and as we have seen in the previous chapter, would have to take place between two users. Whilst this can be mediated by images, I hold, there must also be an argument for that image being experienced as the other user herself for there to be an encounter. We need more than to blindly believe that we are encountering the other. That said, what is useful in Heinrich's account is the reversal of Hillis' position: instead of the avatar pointing back to the user, the user would here emerge forwards through their avatar; that is, we need to conceive of the avatar-sign in a way that does not demand a division between representation and reality. This might be more conducive to grounding the encounter through avatar-interaction.

### 3.3.3. *Tensor*

If the problem with indices is that they point back, and with the Byzantine icon that they demand faith, what is required is a way of conceptualising the avatar as an extension forwards from the user into a social realm. Klang (2004: 397-399) presents a set of arguments that would allow us to understand the relation between the user and the avatar as one of ownership. The agenda here is a legal one but I suggest that these arguments can be explored and expanded in order to demonstrate that the avatar is an extension of the user and not merely a separate image. Klang approaches the question of ownership in terms of reputation, speech, and property.

The avatar is not only an image of the user – albeit not one sharing determinate characteristics such as height, weight, etc. – but is also the sum of the user’s actions. Legal scholars here talk of reputation and the avatar would stand-in for the user as the online manifestation of that reputation, as the focal point for others to make opinions of that user. Klang’s conclusion is that the law should protect that reputation in the same way that it does offline (through slander and libel laws but also the Universal Declaration of Human Rights) but we can also see that the avatar is fundamentally a tool for actions online. Given that this action occurs in a meaningful social context rather than a game I see no reason why this action should be considered distinct from the individual’s actions in any other given context. As Tom Boellstorff observes during the course of his anthropological study of Second Life, these actions have ‘significant consequences for social life’ (2008: 5); that this social commerce is made possible by the Internet does not lessen this impact. Avatars operate in an ‘online social world’ (Stromer-Galley & Martey 2009: 1042). Whilst we cannot claim that the avatar *is* the user, we can unproblematically state that the avatar’s actions *are* the actions of the user. To interact with another user’s avatar online is at the same time to encounter an expression of the other user’s reputation, to respond to the other user’s actions. Should we be concerned that some actions performed online through avatars might not be possible offline? Boellstorff (*ibid*: 26-27) seems to perceive this as a threat to avatar interaction being taken seriously as social interaction, and so he claims that not all users of Second Life are looking for escapism; not everyone, he argues, is a man posing as a woman or a paraplegic walking – some people are *themselves* online. It is unclear that



escapism is really a problem here, though. You can fly in Second Life but this does not mean it should be dismissed as fantasy role-playing: you can free float in a space shuttle. Second Life is simply a different social environment and so whatever takes place there – regardless of whether or not it could take place elsewhere – has meaning. If something is not possible offline it does not mean to say that it is fantasy or delusion online: it is happening in a virtual world via the avatar prosthesis.

This concern for expression is further extended when we consider speech. Through the avatar we express ourselves through text or through the spoken word (via microphones or headsets) and, concludes Klang, it is vital that the law considers the user to have full ownership of their avatar if they are to have freedom of speech. The right to freedom of speech demands the right to one's avatar. As with avatar actions, avatar speech is no different from the speech of the user; whilst this must always be mediated and channelled through the mouth of the avatar (literally or figuratively) this is no different to the use of telephones for conversations or text-messaging. Further, we can see that to encounter the other user's avatar in conversation is to be drawn into an active encounter with the other user, since we respond dialogically to a message that emanates from that user.

Finally, Klang argues that the avatar must be considered as the property of the user that controls it. However, the avatar is not property like a hat or a computer, as Klang notices, but in the sense that John Locke famously expounded: we have the right to our own body, a right of property that no other person can hold of it. Klang explains:

If we see the newly created avatar as coming from the state of nature, it is devoid of personality and does not noticeably differ from many other avatars (except in name). The player's use of the avatar can be seen as enjoining the state of nature with ones [sic] own labour and, as such, the product of these actions, in this case a more powerful and socially adept avatar, should belong to the player since he is the one who has created it (2004: 399).

It is this notion of use that is important: the user gives the avatar its animus, creating a socially active proxy that channels her speech and reputation. This is what makes the avatar probably the first media proxy that can be considered to be an extension of the self. As Klang himself concludes (although his argument does not explicitly support

this, requiring the re-framing I have subjected it to here) ‘the avatar must start to be perceived as an extension of the body’ (ibid: 400). Boellstorff goes as far as to say that the avatar is simply ‘the human online’ (2008: 25).

What kind of sign is this avatar, then? Index and icon have proven unsatisfactory in grounding the encounter. What is required is a notion of sign that captures this extension of the body itself, and this is to be found in Lyotard’s idea of the tensor. Lyotard defines the tensor as follows: ‘At the same time a sign which produces meaning through difference and opposition, and a sign producing intensity through force and singularity’ (2004b: 52). This requires some unpacking. As Lyotard defines it, the tensor is two things at once: intensity and tension. First, the tensor is the extension of the body beyond its organic limitation, projected outwards so that it can mingle with other bodies (ibid: 58). It signifies what Lyotard calls the ‘intensity’ of the body, what we might prefer to call ‘desire’ or ‘drive’ or ‘intention’, the representation of otherwise interior propulsions. We can say on the first count that the tensor signifies the desires of its author extended beyond the limitations of her corporeality. Second, the tensor signifies the meeting point of bodies so extended, the head-on collision of different and opposing desires (Williams 1998: 95). So, it is both the extension of intensity and the point of tension where opposing intensities meet. This takes us beyond the kind of Peircian signs that mark the absence of that which they signify, where the encounter with the signified is always in abeyance, deferred by the dead signs that signify it. What we get instead is an encounter between two bodies, extended beyond themselves by the tensor. They meet in the middle as opposing drives. What is fascinating about the tensor as the meeting-point of these extended bodies is that it demands some negotiation between desires where there is conflict, the tension of the tensor (Woodward 2011: 224). In this way the tensor-sign should be read as an ethico-political sign, a site of conflicting interests that requires resolution but – and this is crucial and should be familiar to readers of Lyotard – it must be a resolution that does not allow for one intensity to be overwhelmed by another, what Lyotard (2007) has called elsewhere ‘bearing witness to the differend’.

What I want to suggest, then, is that the avatar is a tensor. What it signifies is the meeting point of two users extended beyond their bodies. This extension should be

understood as the intensity of the individual, in Lyotard's idiom, or what we would more commonly think of as her desires or intentions. Now, we should not be bamboozled by Lyotard's flowery language; if we look at the avatar we can see that this is a very practical way of thinking of signification. We have already seen, essentially, what it means: the avatar is an expression of the user's reputation and reputation is perception from the outside of an individual's actions and speech, which needs must also, then, be an interpretation of that individual's intentions. To say that the avatar is a tensor is to classify it as a sign to others of the user's reputation. This, I believe, is the simple genius of Lyotard's work here: noting that signs as traditionally conceived represent the deferral of the signified he argues instead, with the tensor, that we should see the sign as an outward projection of the signified such that instead of absence we get presence, referral rather deferral, liveliness rather than a dead marker. Heinrich attempted this also with his idea of the icon but that was not without its obvious flaws and it seems more prudent to reconceptualise the sign as Lyotard does than to return to a Byzantine concept. By changing the way we think about signs we open up the space for a more productive way of thinking about the avatar, one that gives it its dues as a continuation of self. If we want to say that the user has ownership of the avatar as they would ownership of their own body (the Klang-Locke position) then conceiving of the avatar as a sign that extends the body is the way forward.

The tensor is not just that extension of the body but also the meeting place of extended bodies; not just extended intensity but tension between intensities. This, crucially, when applied to avatars, takes us away from the limitations of the 'pointing back' of Hillis' account and the 'pointing forwards plus faith' of Heinrich's. Not only is an avatar a tensor, and so an extension of its user, but the encounter with the avatar is a tensor, a head-on collision with that extension. Two users meet head-on at a point of confrontation, a fundamental collision of two different people's desires. This demands negotiation, the extended intentions, the intensity of the other avatar palpably felt by the opposing user; in this negotiation, this social commerce, a user not only encounters the other user's avatar but the other user's will, her intensity. So all avatars – animated, web-cam, profile, portrait – are signs that there is an other (not mere belief that there is an other) and it is the avatar as focal point that is the frontier for encountering and interacting with that other. Again, Lyotard's conception of the sign recommends itself

because it signifies interaction between bodies rather than the passive interpretation of the sign that necessitates deferral of the signified. In this way, when applied to avatars, we get an encounter between users and not the encounter of one user (the 'I') with a disconnected interface simulacrum; we get the presence of the other, and not the simulacrum as a reminder of her absence (to recall Levinas' complaint of images).

The final triumph of the tensor is that it makes the encounter active and not passive, demanding interaction and negotiation. If we think of the avatar in these terms then we can say that avatar interaction is an ethical encounter. Now, Lyotard's account of how this negotiation between opposed desires in confrontation is to proceed is different to a Levinasian account. For Lyotard, the trick is not to resolve the conflict in one party's favour but to find ways to creatively reformulate the problem such that neither side must accede to the other's terms; that is, Lyotard desires dissensus and not consensus, bearing witness to the differend rather than settling the dispute. This is clearly different from Levinas' account of the encounter with another person as a confrontation. For Levinas, resolution is simple: the other goes before me, the individual responds to the needs of the other rather than to their own desires. I do not think there is a problem here: first, Lyotard's goal is primarily political rather than ethical such that he is concerned with difference groups not acquiescing to the demands of imperialist forces rather than individuals acting selflessly to alleviate the suffering of others; second, the idea of the tensor as a meeting point of two intensities does not demand Lyotard's solution to the tension, such that it is perfectly consistent to reject his and adopt another if deemed desirable. This is not the place to discuss the efficacy of Lyotard's political project so suffice it to say that since the present concern is with ethics it is, at the very least, consistent to seek to explain tension in ethical terms where it is ethical in nature (i.e. when the tension is between responding to the other or pursuing one's own projects). And, in those terms, we can say that the encounter with the other person through their avatar is a point at which there is a tension of opposing intensities; this confrontation is experienced as a limitation of my freedom to act without consideration of how this might run counter to the desires and goals of the other person. The tensor as the meeting point of two extended bodies is a sign that consummates my responsibility for the other person. More than this, where there is an encounter with an avatar that calls for help or

that expresses the suffering of its user that responsibility becomes a demand for response, a moral enthusiasm.

In short: if the avatar is a tensor then it extends the user forwards such that they can be encountered; since the meeting of two users so extended is also a tensor, it is sign that intentions and desires must be limited, that responsibility must be taken not to do harm to the intensity of the other (moral humility); and where the encounter with the other (grounded in the tensor) brings suffering to attention, that responsibility needs must become a response to alleviate said suffering (moral enthusiasm). That is, avatar interaction has the nature of an ethical encounter.

### **Concluding Remarks**

As new media become more and more integral to the ways we interact with people, avatars come to the fore. Whether through social networking sites or webcams or graphic virtual worlds the image gains greater importance for how we encounter other people. These images should be understood as morally evocative, as gesturing towards the concrete reality they represent. By bringing to the mind the sublime otherness of the other person they are at the same time a moral lesson: they remind us that the other person ought to be beyond our unfettered desires, that we must limit our own actions so as not to do injustice to them. Further, images of suffering are gestures towards the brute fact that the suffering of others is inexcusable. These, though, are general lessons. Unless that image can be understood as an extension of a specific person then all we get is a sense of general responsibility rather than a responsibility directed towards a particular other. That image must also signify the other person it stands-in for; the kinds of avatars in use today – animated avatar, web-cam avatar, profile avatar, and portrait avatar – need to be understood not just as images but also as kinds of signs of specific other people. So, I have further argued that the user is extended forward by the avatar such that she can be encountered despite the fact that she is not physically present. The avatar-as-tensor is a sign that demands contemplation about how one's actions may infringe upon the intentions of the person it represents, and therefore it stands as a limitation to one's freedom. With this work on images and signs complete we can then

return to a Levinasian notion of responsibility: such limitation is responsibility for the person that avatar represents; one's actions should not harm that other person and, where suffering is expressed, they should be directed towards responding appropriately. By arguing for the moral evocation of images and for the extension of the user through the avatar, the avatar-as-tensor, I have attempted to show that, contra Žižek, interaction between users is possible online and that the ethical encounter can be motivated through avatars.

In sum, the work of Levinas can still be a useful theoretical tool for understanding responsibility in our new media age, if we challenge his ideas on image and our own on the nature of avatars and signs. As such I have introduced the concepts of moral humility and moral enthusiasm, by reading between Levinas and Kant; and interpreted the avatar as tensor, so grounding the ethical encounter online through an interpretive reading of Lyotard. When we put Levinas to work in the context of avatar interaction it was necessary to produce an active reading and reworking such that online environments can be understood as hosting ethical encounters between users.

#### 4. THE LIMITATIONS OF MORALITY

In the previous chapter it was concluded that an ethics grounded in the encounter between two people *can* be put to work in online environments. This occurs on two levels: first, images of other people encountered online gesture towards our responsibility for others in a general sense; second, to encounter another person's avatar is at the same time to encounter the other person herself such that it initiates a moral relationship with that specific person. In the present chapter I will explore the limitations of what we can say about morality and new media environments. Vinton Cerf, Internet pioneer and computer scientist, has proclaimed: 'A web of glass spans the globe. Through it, brief sparks of light incessantly fly, linking machines chip to chip and people *face to face*' (1991: 72, my emphasis). In the previous chapter it was argued that this face-to-face encounter, mediated by avatars (which includes an image), should be considered just as much an ethical encounter as the unmediated variety found in the work of Emmanuel Levinas. As such, social media – indeed, the entire Internet – might be cast as some sort of revolutionary moral force, creating an environment in which vast numbers of people take responsibility for hitherto distant and inaccessible others. Could we be on the verge of some form of global moral community? Experience – and theoretical prudence – suggests that this cannot be the case.

In what follows I will argue that whilst responsibility is infinite, such that the new media environment allows for ethical encounters with potentially vast numbers of others, moral response is not similarly elastic. This involves two approaches. First I will explore what sorts of limitations ought to be written into an ethical theory that is nonetheless based on an idea of infinite responsibility; for this I will turn to the work of Jacques Derrida who teased these essential limits out of Levinas' ethical theory by reading it through the Biblical story of the 'Binding of Isaac'. It should be noted immediately that these limitations are taken to be useful elements to an ethical theory rather than criticisms of the notion of infinite responsibility: responsibility is infinite whilst response is very much finite. After this more abstract discussion I will then explore some contemporary media events to expand on two practical limitations to moral life in a new media age: (1) that our actions can reach further than our sense of responsibility; and (2) that we can see further than our ability to affect what is seen.

These are external limitations to Levinas' ethical theory that arise through increased technology use; since Levinas does not consider technology it is necessary to turn instead to other resources and so to assist in the first point I will draw on the work of Zygmunt Bauman and, for the second, Paul Virilio. By utilising these resources I will be able to conclude that the proliferation of new media is not sufficient to ground the notion of a global moral community; instead, the relationship between responsibility and technology utilised throughout the remaining chapters will hinge on this more realistic account of what we can and cannot say about responsibility.

#### **4.1. A Limitation in Theory**

Our awareness of the things going on in the world can only grow as new media develop. The channels of communication are increased. No longer do we receive information solely through news bulletins at breakfast, lunch and teatime, or through the morning and evening newspapers; it is now constantly available, through rolling news, online newspapers (both those exclusively online and the content uploaded regularly by the print newspapers), Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and so on. The news is now instantly available. It is also no longer produced solely by professionals; today, it is not uncommon for Twitter to break news first, for Flickr to provide the first photographs, or a shaky mobile phone video posted to YouTube to be the first footage of an event. Not only, then, are there more channels, but so too are there more contributors and therefore more contributions. Today, there needs be no delay in our awareness – we can access information instantly and it is uploaded constantly by many, many people – and there are no longer strict editorial limits to what is newsworthy, since users can generate whatever content they like and since the more traditional outlets need to fuel an insatiable rolling news format. All in all, our awareness is heightened because more information is available more of the time, indeed, without delay when posted in real-time. The only conclusion that can be drawn from this, in the context of ethical theory, is that the new media age must be one in which we have a greater awareness of the human suffering that goes on around us – locally and globally – and that these encounters with suffering are morally provocative. This latter is a conclusion we can draw after the work done in the previous chapter: where the suffering is presented



through the image we can say that such images gesture towards the idea that the suffering of others is inexcusable, what I have called moral humility; and, where the suffering is presented via an avatar, we can say that an ethical encounter has taken place such that I am called upon to respond to alleviate this suffering, what I have called moral enthusiasm. Intuitively, I would suggest that the ethical theorist should be content to stop here: we feel responsible when we see suffering through media and we are compelled to respond where encounters through media take place, where a one-on-one relationship has been entered into.

Not everyone has stopped at this more modest and intuitive point, however. If awareness of suffering moves us towards responding morally, they reason, then the global awareness of the media environment should move us towards a global morality; this, at any rate, is the motivation behind, for example: both Marshall McLuhan's (1964) and Paul Levinson's (2001) conception of the global village; Barbara Adam's (1995: 107-124) account of media ethics grounded in observations of time; Douglas Schuler's (2008) 'communication revolution' consisting, in part, of increased visualisation of difference groups and the resultant responsibility for their plight; and David Meek's (forthcoming) account of how YouTube increases awareness in a way that allows for collective action in response. As was argued in the previous two chapters, the encounter with suffering demands a response and this can occur through media images and avatars. However, it would be an error to conclude from such singular ethical encounters some sort of massively moral community. This is what the aforementioned accounts appear to attempt, utilising some fairly dodgy mathematics:

$$'I' + \text{other} = \text{ethical} \therefore 'I' + (\text{other}_1 + \text{other}_2 + \text{other}_3 \dots + \text{other}_n) = \text{ethical}$$

In (other) words, these media-assisted moral communities are the result of a simplistic multiplication of one ethical encounter by all the potential encounters possible through the media. Intuitively, it seems unlikely in the extreme that morality would work like this, that increased exposure to others increases moral action exponentially without exhaustion. This intuition finds theoretical explication in Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death* (1995).

In this text, Derrida explores Levinas' ethics through the Biblical story of the 'Binding of Isaac' (Genesis 22: 1-14). To recall, this is the story of Abraham being called by God to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. God does not explain why Abraham must do this, nor does Abraham ask. Instead, Abraham must choose whether he is responsible to God or to his son. He cannot be faithful to God without failing Isaac; and he cannot spare Isaac without ignoring the demand of God. There is sacrifice here in both actions and whatever Abraham does he fails in his responsibility to one of Isaac or God. He chooses to obey God and takes his son to Mount Moriah to perform the sacrifice asked of him – and the rest of the story is well known and besides the point. To recall my remarks in Chapter Two, this should be understood as a story that illuminates the ideas in Levinas' work; that work is taken to be philosophically justified without the need to treat the obvious Judaeo-Christian connotations as structurally necessary.

For Derrida, this story exemplifies the paradox of responsibility in the work of Levinas. As we have seen in the previous two chapters, responsibility is about responding: 'answering to the other' (Derrida 1995: 26). The question is: *Who do I respond to?* Now, it is 'barely conceivable' that a father would be called upon to murder his son without explanation; but, for Derrida, this extraordinary story illustrates 'the most common and everyday experience of responsibility' (ibid: 67). Namely: 'I cannot respond to the call, the request, the obligation, or even the love of another without sacrificing the other other, the other others' (ibid: 68). That is to say that the predicament Abraham finds himself in is repeated all the time in our day-to-day existence. 'How', asks Derrida, 'would you ever justify the fact that you sacrifice all the cats in the world to the cat that you feed at home every morning for years, whereas other cats die of hunger at every instant? Not to mention other people?' (ibid: 71). We are all always in Abraham's situation; whatever we do, we fulfil one duty but betray all other obligations – obligations to other others, strangers and loved ones (and cats) alike – without being able to justify why. Abraham's intended sacrifice of Isaac is monstrous and unforgivable but it is at the same time 'the most common event in the world' (ibid: 85). Moral responsibility may be infinite but that also means that one can never live up to it, that moral response always involves the sacrifice of others for whom one is also responsible. The little good that can exist in the world, the response to the suffering other, is only possible because of this unjustifiable sacrifice; this may not be a 'feel-

good' account (quite the opposite to the comforting thought that one is acting for the best for the greatest number, say), and it does not help one make moral decisions – but it certainly seems to describe the way morality works in the mess of reality.

This account demonstrates that we are always forced to choose between competing demands, to sacrifice one responsibility for another. The massive availability of images and information about others through the new media would only make the sacrifice – in the sense of choosing not to respond – greater. It is obviously true that the media increase our awareness of the needy but it is simply not the case that we can respond to all of them. Instead, it becomes a matter of responding to some and sacrificing the many. It is barely possible to respond to all of one's emails, let alone to respond morally to all of the encounters that might demand such a response. Now that the news is constant, that personal relationships with many others can be initiated through Twitter and Facebook, the calls for help (literal or figurative) would be deafeningly constant, and one's ability to respond would be limited. The world does not become more moral as it becomes technologically connected: awareness grows but the same limitation of moral action that Derrida observed on the Mount remains in place. It is still unacceptable not to heed the call for help of another person – but it is something that occurs all the time.

Franz Kafka's reflections on the same story are further enlightening:

I could conceive of another Abraham – to be sure, he would never get to be a patriarch or even an old-clothes dealer –, an Abraham who would be prepared to satisfy the demand for a sacrifice immediately, with the promptness of a waiter, but would be unable to bring it off because he cannot get away, being indispensable; the household needs him, there is always something or other to take care of, the house is never ready; but without having his house ready, without having something to fall back on, he cannot leave – this the Bible also realized, for it says: “He set his house in order” (in Benjamin 1999a: 125).

Here another limitation is made obvious: not only can we not respond to all our moral responsibilities, but also we cannot forsake our local and/or current responsibilities for those that emerge. So, to apply Kafka's lesson to new media, it is not the case that encounters with others from around the world lead *ipso facto* to a global moral community for it is not, on the face of it, obvious that one could leave one's own

location without having first set it in order. Combining Derrida and Kafka, if sacrifice is an inevitable part of ethics then is it not more likely – even if it is not justifiable – that what is sacrificed is done so in favour of one’s *immediate* responsibilities? That is, with the proviso that one, like Kafka’s Abraham, would have performed this other duty ‘with the promptness of a waiter’ were it not for the antecedent responsibility. In sum: since it would contravene these theoretical limitations of ethics, we should resist the temptation to expand the account given in the previous chapter beyond reasonable application; it is suitable for a new media age but it does not miraculously transform that age into some sort of massively moral environment.

Curiously, Abraham’s answer to God’s command is, somewhat obliquely, ‘Here I am’. Abraham knows that no-one else can take his place and so ‘Here I am’ is an utterance that assumes a unique responsibility (such as that which we get in Levinas, as discussed in Chapter Two, where responsibility is mine alone and others cannot assume it for me). However, the problem with responsibility in the new media age is precisely where this ‘Here’ is, that is, how the location of the ‘I’ that would assume responsibility affects their ability to be responsible or to respond. In other words, we need to examine the limitations of morality when acting- and seeing-at-a-distance through new technologies.

## **4.2. Limitations in Practice**

In this section, guided by two theoretical accounts of acting- and seeing-at-a-distance, I will focus on several recent media events in order to examine the relationship between new media and moral responsibility in terms of the ‘here’ of the user – and the ‘elsewhere’ of the suffering. This work is deliberately grounded in what could be gleaned of these events from media sources, which is the appropriate way of assessing the level of moral responsibility that would be derived from such sources. It should be noted that the objective here is not to assess whether or not new media assist in revealing world events to distant audiences – I hold it to be self-evident that they do, with Twitter, in particular, playing an important role in reporting events from the ground – but to look at the connection of these events and new media in terms of action and responsibility. As such, the first sub-section examines the use of new media and the

impact of this action elsewhere whilst the second assesses the audience of new media and the potential for action in response.

#### 4.2.1. *Acting-at-a-distance*

The first limitation I want to introduce emerges in Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust* (2007). From his study of the bureaucratic system of organising genocide, Bauman draws the conclusion that human actions could be extended much further than could be moral responsibility. Our responsibility for others is limited by geography whilst technological advances allow us to act at an increasing distance from the object of our actions. He writes:

Being inextricably tied to human proximity, morality seems to conform to the law of optical perspective. It looms large and thick close to the eye. With the growth of distance, responsibility for the other shrivels, moral dimensions of the object blur, till both reach the vanishing point and disappear from view (ibid: 192).

This is why it was possible for the so-called 'desk killers' of the Holocaust, the bureaucrats who performed actions that bore little relation to the killing, such as timetabling trains to death camps, to participate in a reprehensible travesty: they did not have to confront the suffering of their distant victims and so their sense of moral responsibility was truncated – if at all existent. There are two intertwined points here: that the technologies of modern bureaucracy allow for action at a great distance, with a disconnection between the localised action and its distant object; and that moral responsibility is not elastic, such that when the suffering of the other is out of sight moral responsibility is diminished. This latter point speaks to a natural limitation in human moral behaviour: our sense of responsibility does not travel well. When coupled with the former point this lack of responsibility for the other becomes something more troubling, a lack of responsibility for the effects of one's own actions on distant others.

The technological apparatus that Bauman is concerned with in his study of the Holocaust is now, in our new media age, more advanced. Today, acting-at-a-distance is no longer solely about the workings of a state apparatus, as increasingly more powerful technologies are placed in the hands of private individuals; the ability of the individual

to act and influence at-a-distance is supplied by the global networks these technologies connect to. With something like the smart phone, which can access the Internet and various social media through wi-fi, it becomes possible to act on the move and at a remove from what is affected by that action. What I want to do is to extend his observations through to the present day by focusing upon the contexts within which such technologies are used in order to argue that new media can take moral responsibility beyond breaking point. At the time of writing, England has recently (August 2011) been engulfed by rioting that quickly degenerated into looting, arson attacks, and violent confrontations with police and bystanders. Starting initially in North London, these activities rapidly spread across the capital and to cities in the Midlands and the North West, and those involved were predominantly teenagers and young adults. Whilst it is beyond the scope of this present work to explore *why* this took place, what is of interest here is to examine *how* it was organised. Both Channel 4 News and the *Guardian* have reported that those taking part in the rioting organised themselves through the use of the BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) service. Operating through BlackBerry mobile phones, this service is popular with the young since it combines the ability to send free messages (unlike text messaging) directly to individuals or to large numbers of people (like Twitter) as broadcast messages. Of specific relevance to the riots, these broadcast messages are private (like text messaging and unlike Twitter) and encrypted such that they cannot be accessed by those who have not received them directly (i.e. the police). One broadcast message to organise looting, reproduced in a *Guardian* article, read:

If you're down for making money, we're about to go hard in east london tonight, yes tonight!! I don't care what ends you're from, we're personally inviting you to come and get in. Police have taken the piss for too long and to be honest I don't know why its taken so long for us to make this happen. We need a minimum of 200 hungry people. We're not broke, but who says no to free stuff. Doesn't matter if the police arrive cos we'll chase dem out because as you've seen on the news, they are NOT ON DIS TING. Everyone meet at 7 at stratford park and let's get rich (Halliday 2011).

Channel 4 News reported that such messages were being sent along with the request to resend them to everyone in the receiver's contact list, such that the message is sent on to potentially hundreds of other people by just one person – and then so and so on. For example: 'Keep sending this around to bare man, make sure no snitch boys get dis!!!'

(Ball & Brown 2011). In such a way, seemingly spontaneous acts of mass criminality are, in fact, carefully organised through social media. Leaving to one side the people that resend such messages and take part in the subsequently arranged action, if we focus on the presumably large numbers of people who resent the message but had no intention of participating<sup>9</sup> then we can say something interesting about the disconnect between technologically-extended action and responsibility.

Take the message reproduced above: how easy, indeed, tempting, must it appear to the recipient to resend that message as instructed, particularly if they empathise with the socio-economic standing of the young people who are involved in the looting? Here we have Bauman's (2005) 'flawed consumers', people who are constantly told that they need the consumer goods they cannot afford, looting for consumer desirables such as trainers, mobile phones, and flat-screen televisions. One might, out of solidarity, resend that message near instantly and if there is no intention to take part then the reality of the repercussions appears distant. As the riots continued, residences were burnt to the ground and police and bystanders were injured or, in the latter case, killed: three men in Birmingham died apparently attempting to protect their neighbourhood from the looting and vandalism (Wintour et al 2011). How removed is this from the empathetic youth who simply forwards a BBM message to all her friends, from the comfort of her bedroom? The point is that there is a disparity between the act of resending a message and the devastating consequences, between the localised action and the bigger picture that it plays a part in, such that the sense of responsibility for the part the smaller action plays in the grand scheme of things is diminished. In evidence, a teenager in Glasgow (where there was no rioting) has been arrested for encouraging the rioting via Facebook (which, unlike BBMs, *can* be accessed by the police) (Carrell 2011); and two men have been sentenced to four years jail – far longer than the average sentences for looters – for setting up, separately, Facebook groups in (failed) attempts to encourage others to riot in Manchester (Bowcott, Carter & Clifton 2011). Bauman's fear was that moral responsibility diminished with the distance between action and effect since it was not possible to see what one was responsible for; it is unclear that even when we reinstate the visualisation of the effect – through televised news – that moral responsibility can

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<sup>9</sup> Probably we will never know the exact numbers here since, as mentioned above, the BBM service is encrypted. Research in Motion, the makers of BlackBerry, have said that even they themselves might not be able to break the encryption (Halliday 2011).

still go the distance when the action taken is so localised and seemingly so innocuous. For example, sending a BBM during the riots can take place in a location unmarked by rioting – either another city or a different part of the same city – and the connection between pressing a button on a phone and setting fire to a building would appear at the time to be tenuous or non-existent despite the fact that the riots received extensive news coverage almost from their inception.

What if we take an event that is instead widely considered as a positive use of social media, the Arab Spring of 2010-11? It is again beyond the scope of the present work to comment on the wider socio-political context of this uprising – and, indeed, to pass judgement on what it has achieved – but of relevance here is the use of Twitter and Facebook to mobilise masses across the Middle East to protest against unjust rule, in particular in Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt (where Hosni Mubarak was eventually toppled). A commentator for the *Guardian* noted that ‘[t]he barricades today do not bristle with bayonets and rifles, but with phones’ (Beaumont 2011), the observation being that people were using social media applications on their smart phones to organise and to relate what was happening, the latter being vital in gaining world-wide support. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the social networking site Twitter being so popular in general without smart phones, since one would be limited to tweeting thoughts and experiences that occurred from one’s computer desk, which is, to say the least, quite a limitation. With smart phones tweeting can take place wherever is necessary. Handsets such as Apple’s iPhone are the hardware that sustains social media. Apple, who have recently overtaken ExxonMobil as the most valuable company in the world (Rushe 2011), contract Foxconn, the electronics manufacturer, to produce the iPhone. Production takes place in the Longhua factory in Shenzhen, China, where there have been a significant number of cases of workers falling to their deaths – ten, the last time such a story was reported (Branigan 2010). The official line coming out of China is that these were suicides, although the aforementioned report suggests that the fatalities were ‘suspicious’. The implication is that either the working environment is fatally unsafe or that the working conditions – the hours being demanded of workers to meet demand for the iPhone, combined with a strict regime that forbids talking on the production line, and all for low pay – are especially conducive to suicide. It could, of course, be both. The point is that the technology that sustains social networking is borne amidst human



suffering. Every tweet from an iPhone is made possible by the work practices at the Longhua factory; we tweet without any consideration that the phone that facilitates this is produced in such abhorrent conditions, such that, again, the localised act of tweeting is distanced from the suffering it entails elsewhere.

This is obviously a much more indirect case of an action being removed from a distant, negative effect than with the riots in the UK and it takes us beyond Bauman's account of the Holocaust and towards a discussion of the price we pay for our consumer society. Bauman (2008b) has recently begun to think through ethics in a consumer society but, as discussed in Chapter One, he largely leaves behind Levinas in favour of a Kantian account of global cosmopolitanism that is currently favoured also by Ulrich Beck (2011). If Bauman discussed social media in any detail – and he is frequently unwilling to explore new media – then the point we might agree upon is that they are inextricably part of a consumer society and so any suggestion that they can be used for positive, morally guided social change (such as with the Arab Spring) is offset by the fact that this can never be change that goes beyond the constraints of consumer capitalism, with all the negative and frequently unseen side-effects that entails. I will return to a discussion of social media and their place within a consumer capitalist framework in Chapters Eight and Nine. If we go back to his work on the Holocaust, though, we can say something also about moral responsibility. That is: new media technologies can be used in such a way that our awareness of how our actions affect others is either non-existent or so removed from the innocuousness of the act or the banality of its setting – it is possible to start a riot, apparently, from one's bedroom or, via a mobile phone, in a doctor's waiting room or a Starbucks – that moral responsibility just does not go the distance. This suggests that we should not write ethical theory with unrealistic ideas of moral responsibility; although it was possible to go beyond Levinas and ground the ethical encounter in direct media communication in the previous chapter, it would appear that it is unlikely we can go beyond this, to go as far as to say that new media in general will cause moral responsibility to blossom. When Kafka writes that Abraham would have to set his house in order before answering a call to duty he suggests a voluntary localisation of responsibility; what we have seen here is that there is an involuntary localisation of responsibility, since it simply does not reach the distances our networked technologies can. As Derrida would read Levinas, this is unjustifiable in

the sense that we cannot excuse it just because it happens, as if it were morally neutral just because it was unavoidable; but what I must add is that it is a result of acting-at-a-distance, that this is an inherent feature of our new media age.

The examples above were used to pick out this practical limitation of morality rather than to offer any meaningful analysis of the events themselves; research that focused in detail on these events, and also, for example, cyber-bullying, in order to fully explore this issue would be merited. What I find most telling about the examples I have used here is that we live in an age where our awareness of human suffering is massively increased – news footage and tweets about the riots, stories about the deaths of factory workers – but that something as old-fashioned as geographical distance means that it does not always register as a moral demand – and so we might encourage the riots through social media or unquestioningly sing the praises of the smart phones that allow us to tweet or update Facebook pages on the move. Geographical distance; psychic distance; moral distance: there is a mutual connection between these terms that limits what we can say about moral responsibility in a new media age. Perhaps, to revert to an earlier phrase, when we act at-a-distance we do so without *moral humility*, without a sense that how it may affect others is more important than our own desire to perform the action.

#### 4.2.2. *Seeing-at-a-distance*

I want to begin the discussion here with an observation from Paul Virilio that appears on the face of it to be obvious but that nonetheless gestures towards important conclusions about the ethical dimensions of the new media age. If the problem above was that new technologies allow us to act at a distance removed from suffering elsewhere, then what I want to address here is that they also allow us to see far beyond our capabilities to affect what is seen. Virilio, in *The Vision Machine* (1996), writes: ‘The bulk of what I see is, in fact and in principle, no longer within my reach. And even if it lies within reach of my sight, it is no longer necessarily inscribed on the map of the “I can”’ (ibid: 7). ‘I can’: it has been fundamental to ethics that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, that is, that one can only be expected to act to relieve the suffering of others when it is possible that one can do so. The passage from Virilio highlights the problem of enacting

a response to the responsibility evoked by media feeds. Through new technologies we can see further than ever before, see things we would not have otherwise been aware of. When confronted with the suffering presented through the media it is not sufficient alone to *feel* responsible: some response is demanded if we are to say that this is a properly moral environment. But, as Virilio (*ibid*) observes, what we can witness through the media is no longer marked by the 'I can'. That is to say, whilst we can now be called to bear witness to global events we are largely helpless to do anything about them. What David Harvey (2004: 260) called 'time-space compression' is, if we follow Virilio's line of thought, incomplete or at least one-sided: whilst geographical distance and the time taken to traverse it is obliterated in order to bring these events to our attention, it remains prohibitively in place if we wish to respond in a morally useful way (an argument I will return to in Chapter Nine).

Virilio's observation is most powerfully evoked if we revisit one of the seminal media events of the twenty-first century, 9/11; such a revisitation is intended here to extend Virilio's work into a consideration, first, of the moral dimensions of witnessing such events from afar and, second, of the more direct moral relationships made possible by mobile media communication between those caught up in such events and those they contact who are outside of it. Much academic work has been devoted to understanding the attacks on the Twin Towers, including important interventions into the impact of the media presentation of this event (see, in particular, Baudrillard 2003 and Žižek 2002). The ethical significance of these kinds of events *as events* will be addressed in detail in the next chapter but I want here to briefly remark upon the way this event unfolded. Amateur footage recorded Flight 11 hitting the North Tower and was then transmitted very quickly afterwards by major news agencies. Given that those in the tower above the impact were unable to descend to the ground, this was footage of one group of people whose survival was impossible and another, those below the impact, whose survival was dependent on their ability to exit the tower as quickly as possible. Already, then, the audience is witness to an event wherein literally nothing can be done to help some and nothing they can do can help the rest. Numbers are approximate but upwards of a hundred people in the former group are seen to jump to their deaths. A little over fifteen minutes later Flight 175 hits the South Tower, an event captured by the now in-place (traditional) news media. This is likely to have been watched live by those whose

attention had been attracted by the coverage of the first attack, a position I found myself in. This time a larger audience is now again witness to a race for survival that they cannot affect. Less than an hour after being hit the South Tower begins to collapse; the North Tower begins to collapse just under thirty minutes later: this is, in very narrow terms, the end of the event. Now, I do not want to suggest that this was viewed as a form of entertainment – although I will discuss this in relation to the work of Jean Baudrillard in the next chapter – but rather that the person who watches this event unfold is denied the role of a moral agent. No intervention can alleviate the suffering of the people trapped in the towers or those who are attempting to evacuate them. The speed of the transmission – real-time footage of the second tower being hit – is simply not quick enough given the speed with which it collapsed, such that no immediate response is possible. There could be no starker demonstration of Virilio's claim that media present to us images shorn of the 'I can' and this limitation, as well as showing that the account offered in the previous chapter is ideal and not always practicable, will need to be written into the ethics of the event developed in the next chapter.

What was particularly striking about this event – along with the unforgettable images of the plane strikes, the billowing smoke from the towers, and the Falling Man – were the telephone calls made by those caught up in the attacks to those outside of them. This was the case not only in the Twin Towers but also on United Airlines Flight 93 which crashed in Pennsylvania. The emergence of the mobile phone as an affordable technology coupled with the location of such an event in the affluent West meant that this was arguably the first time that such a phenomenon had been experienced on this scale. This allowed for direct ethical encounters to be opened up between those suffering and those external to that suffering; rather than the general encounter of suffering afforded by the television coverage, here there is a moral relationship with a particular other. What is particularly harrowing about listening to these messages – some of which were broadcast later on the news or in documentaries – is not only that the recipient of the call is made aware of the awful situation that the caller is in but that *they are powerless to act to alleviate it.*

In the decade that has passed since 9/11 mobile telephones have become more prevalent such that this situation is repeated in many atrocities and another example will

demonstrate how the use of text messaging extends this moral helplessness. On 22 July 2011 Anders Breivik shot and killed 69 mostly teenagers on the Norwegian island of Utøya. Breivik had already captured the world media's attention through a bomb attack on Oslo earlier that day which killed eight, a fact that, apparently, he relied upon by disguising himself as a police officer before travelling to Utøya. Those on the island, who were aware of the earlier bombing, were gathered around by this 'police officer' in order to learn more about the incident in Oslo, at which point the massacre began. Many of those trapped on the island called or sent text messages to parents. One text message implored: 'Mummy, tell the police they must be quick. People are dying here!' (Guardian 2011); another, from a son to his parents, read simply: 'I love you both. I don't think I'll see you again' (Berg 2011); both survived but the situation at the instant of receipt of such messages cannot take this fact as granted. Again, a direct ethical encounter is initiated but without any recourse for response by the interlocutor. The use of mobile phones here quickly alerted those on the mainland about what was taking place, and there are many accounts of people taking boats out to save those who had attempted to swim away from the island. Phone calls and text messages were also exchanged between those on Utøya so that they could attempt to stay one step ahead of Breivik or to offer each other survival advice (Martinovic 2011). However, it took Norwegian police nearly an hour to reach the island after which Breivik quickly, and without resistance, surrendered. Whilst the reason offered for this delay was that a helicopter was not available – the police had to take the lengthier journey by road – a television crew were able to shoot footage of the massacre from their own chopper. So, here we have an event that those external to it were made almost immediately aware of, of which video footage is shot, but which no-one can intervene in to help the teenagers trapped on the island. Sadly, simple geography – the inaccessibility of the island – trumped advanced technology.

There is unverifiable conjecture that the news crew in the helicopter decided not to broadcast footage of Breivik executing stricken youths after one of their number, upon being physically ill at what they saw, decided that no-one else need be put through this. Whether this story is apocryphal or not, what it tells us about the fine line between bearing witness to the suffering of others and the morally troubling act of helplessly watching the suffering of others is an important lesson. The examples above show that

increased awareness of suffering is by no means sufficient to conclude that the witness is in a position to do anything about it. The coverage of such suffering – video footage on the news or YouTube, eyewitness accounts on Twitter, mobile telephone calls or text messages – involves us in an event that we cannot affect. The decision the helicopter news crew made was not to inflict the same helplessness that they experienced on a wider audience. All such footage would have satisfied is a voyeuristic urge; or, at least, they would reduce people who would ordinarily be compelled to offer whatever assistance necessary to voyeurs – against their will.

When Meek (forthcoming) argues that our awareness of suffering leads to collective action, with YouTube as his case study, he is half right. Combining Robert Sack's (1997) argument that geographical awareness is at the same time moral awareness with Barry Wellman's (2001) reclassification of the online environment as 'cyberplace', Meek concludes that participation in the online geography leads to moral awareness of the suffering of others which leads to moral concern which leads, ultimately, to moral action. I accept Sack's position – that awareness of one's environment is vital for engendering moral awareness – and I think that Wellman's conceptualisation of the online as a place is unproblematic for the way I conceive of the online, and quite possibly correct (it does not make a difference to the present work if it is correct or not); but if we look at Meek's argument about moral action – 'resistance' as he calls it – then we can see that his argument is circular. He uses the example of YouTube footage of child soldiers in Uganda, the reappearance of disappeared children, leading to moral action. This led, he reports, to emotive posts on the YouTube page and people seeking to find out how they could help; the kind of help they were advised to offer was educating others. So awareness does not here lead to moral action: it leads to awareness. This, presumably, does not cover the full range of available actions but it does indicate the problem we are up against: that distance is a limitation to moral action. I do not doubt – and I have not argued against the idea – that such images are morally provocative; but too often what they provoke simply is not helpful for an immediate alleviation of suffering, which is no less than what the encounter with suffering demands. The kinds of responses available to the witness are limited, to the point of being seriously diminished, by distance. All of these media feeds about global events certainly increase our awareness of the suffering that takes place around the world; but

our involvement in these events is not that of a moral actor but of a voyeur. Returning to Derrida and Kafka, new media present to us the various ways that we fail to live up to our infinite responsibilities, the various people we have not and cannot help, such that now sacrifice and voyeurism combine; and if it was not possible for Abraham to respond to external demands before setting his house in order, now we can say that new media create demands that it simply is not possible to respond to. Even the promptness of the waiter, as Kafka put it, would be nowhere near prompt enough. The point is this: there is not an increase in moral good simply by virtue of there being an increase in media-facilitated awareness; there is just increased awareness. This is not to say that there is a problem with new media but rather that there are limits to what we can say about their role in moral life.

Again, it was not possible to afford the space due to the events covered above, since the objective was merely to draw out the problem with assuming that awareness leads to action; the attacks in Norway in particular deserve further and focused attention in this respect as would, for example, instances of suicides performed in front of web-cam audiences. In sum, the problem here is that even where moral humility (or moral concern, in Meek's idiom) becomes a moral enthusiasm to act, where the awareness of suffering urges us to respond, it is not necessarily the case that this can be acted upon adequately. Distance is no barrier to awareness or concern but it certainly is when it comes to action. This should be seen as a practical limit to what we can say about moral life in our new media age.

### **Concluding Remarks**

I have argued that we should limit our expectations about responsibility in a new media age precisely because morality is intrinsically limited – and the new media environment only makes that limitation more obvious. This involved, first, the argument that multiplying the number of people encountered is not sufficient to multiply the number of acts of moral responsibility. All it increases is the difficulty of making moral decisions and the number of obligations one must sacrifice. It must be stressed that making such decisions and sacrifices is *not* part of ethics as found in Levinas: it is its

limitation, not something that facilitates some smaller amount of moral action. To make the decision to ignore one plea for help and to attend another is always a moral failure. However, as Levinas observes; ‘If there were just two of us in the world, there wouldn’t be any problem: it is the other who goes before me’ (2006a: 91); that this is not the case, that there are many others – vast numbers accessible through new media – complicates matters. We have to choose who to respond to, a process that belongs not to ethics but to justice; and justice, for Levinas, is a violent (in the sense that the suffering of some others is tolerated in a decision to alleviate suffering elsewhere) and yet fundamentally necessary part of human existence (ibid: 90). In Chapters Six and Seven I will return to considerations of how new media affect our awareness of and involvement with others, in the former arguing that they allow for a selective disassociation from local others in the urban environment and, in the latter, that the very design of social media sites makes encounters with unfamiliar others unlikely.

The second set of limitations were practical, pertaining to how we act- and see-at-a-distance, and how this affects our involvement in events. It was argued, using the examples of the August 2011 riots in the UK and the factory conditions of the social media-supporting iPhone, that new technologies allow us to act without a sense of responsibility for what is affected by these actions. Our actions manifest themselves in locations distant to our own and yet it is often the case that moral humility does not. It was then argued that our awareness of events through media has no bearing on our ability to respond morally, creating, not a global moral community, but, more likely, a state of media-assisted voyeurism. Here, moral responsibility is evoked by events that occur beyond our grasp, that have travelled further in our direction than we can in theirs. The problem with media-assisted awareness is that the suffering that is presented may be accessible near-instantly but already too late for the individual who bears witness to it; moral actions simply cannot match the speed of transmission and moral enthusiasm (‘I ought’) is not matched by ability (‘I can’). Clearly these two arguments are in tension with each other since one suggests that we can act further than our awareness stretches and the other that we can see further than our actions stretch; they pertain in different circumstances and although they cannot occupy the same space, so to speak, they both speak to the realities of our new media age.



Returning to the argument of the previous chapter, we see that the kinds of ethical encounters we have online – that I grounded in an avatar ethics that combined the idea of responsibility in Levinas with ideas about the ethical function of images and signs – are undermined by the endurance of the distance that is traversed by new media. We should resist the temptation to expect that the account I offered there might suggest that new media will radically expand moral responsibility *and* response around the globe. Instead, when we think about ethics and new media, we should always bear in mind the responsibilities of the individual and all the limitations that exist with regard to them; this is what is so valuable in the work of Levinas, so long as we work it through our new environment: responsibility falls to the individual alone and she falls hopelessly short of meeting it. We must not lose sight of the reality of responsibility, dazzled by the reach and awareness afforded by new media: we will fall short.

## 5. AN ETHICS OF THE EVENT

The sorts of events discussed in the previous chapter – riots such as those witnessed across England in August 2011; revolutions such as the Arab Spring in 2010/11; terrorist attacks such as 11 September 2001; atrocities such as the Breivik mass murder on Utøya in 2011 – are, simultaneously, media events. In a new media age the coverage of events like these takes them out of their specific spatio-temporal context and makes them accessible to global witnesses. Above I explored the nature of responsibility in relation to these media events, working from an account of ethics that recognises one-to-one responsibility, the ethical encounter as discussed in Chapters Two and Three. This was beneficial in terms of staking out the limitations of morality so conceived and yet it is apparent that this allows for no consideration of what makes the event ethically significant in itself. Intuitively, I would like to say that something like the collapse of the Twin Towers is morally evocative as a whole, beyond the one-to-one encounter with a suffering other; *intuitively* because these media events are presented and viewed as coherent occurrences (rather than simple additions of individual suffering) and because they are deemed exceptional enough to become media events in the first place. What is required is *an ethics of the event*.

This will take place in two parts, first, drafting an account of an ethics of the event before, second, examining the impact on this of new media. In the first section I will explore in greater detail existing theories of the event in order to explain precisely what is meant by ‘event’ in the present context as well as to open up lines of flight for thinking about events in ethical terms. Returning to the ethical theory of Emmanuel Levinas, I will argue that the everyday encounter with another person is already a significant event; when thinking about the event, in ethical terms at least, what gives it significance is the presence of these extraordinary yet everyday ethical events. Then, drawing on Jean-François Lyotard’s account of the sublime event, I will argue that what gives us one whole ethically significant event, rather than a collection of ethical events (encounters with individual suffering), is bearing witness to unimaginable levels of human suffering. The event as a coherent whole is evocative of the sort of moral enthusiasm discussed in the previous two chapters; however, since this enthusiasm is evoked by the quantity of human suffering it is towards individuals that response is

directed. One is responsible to individuals not to events, and at this point the moral agent is returned to the sort of ethical event we find in Levinas, the one-to-one encounter. In the second section I will argue that the presentation of the event as image-event does not lessen its moral impact (contra Jean Baudrillard and in keeping with my argument regarding images in Chapter Three)<sup>10</sup> even where response is impracticable; however the emergence of the ‘actor-spectator’, a moral agent caught up in the event but following it simultaneously through media feeds, is introduced – through consideration of the Mumbai Attacks of November 2008 – as a moral problem *apropos* the enactment of moral response.

## 5.1. The Event

A convincing account of the ethics of the event – rather than moralising about events or giving an account of how we moralise about events (as with moral panics, which are usually media confections) – has yet to be articulated. The difficulty may well be that their significance as political phenomena is emphasised in theoretical literatures rather than as moral phenomena. This needs to be addressed in more detail before I can sketch my own account of the ethics of the event.

### 5.1.1. *An Ethics of the Event?*

An event is literally a happening or an occurrence but within a certain theoretical tradition the sorts of events we are presently concerned with take on the role of a political philosophical concept, and the key theorists in this regard are Lyotard and Alain Badiou.

Lyotard would understand the events introduced in the previous chapter as radical shifts in the status quo that demand a political response. He writes: ‘In sum, there are events: something happens which is not tautological with what has happened’ (2007: 79), or, in other words, something happens that is not a repetition of what has gone before it. This

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<sup>10</sup> Specifically, this is a return to the arguments about image derived from my reading between Levinas, Aristotle/Gadamer, and Kant; I will not return also to the remarks on signs since the presence of avatars is not predominant in the presentation of the kinds of events I am concerned with.

seems to have a double meaning: it might pick out happenings that are unprecedented, such that literally nothing like it has happened before (Bennington 1988: 9); and it might also pick out a less extreme sort of non-tautological occurrence, where something happens that is out of synch with the normal procession of everyday happenings. When Lyotard discusses events he returns time and again to the French Revolution, the Holocaust, and *les événements* of May '68: I would say that the Holocaust would fall into the *sui generis* sort of radicality – though this is far from uncontroversial (for a discussion of the uniqueness thesis see the contributions to Rosenbaum 1996) – as well as 11 September 2001; revolutions, student protests, and less symbolically momentous terrorist attacks would fall under the heading of radicality qualified as the emergence of something distinctly extraordinary but of a familiar genre. In both cases what Lyotard calls events are 'devoid of figure' but 'really big however in historical nature' (2009: 33), the sorts of occurrences that disrupt everything that went before – and herein lies the political response. These events demand that the individual attempt to bear witness to them in a process of anamnesis (and the attempt of the Nazis to create a genocidal event that would be forgotten to history is clearly an influence on Lyotard here) even though they are devoid of figure – something I will explore later in this section.

Badiou, too, emphasises the emergence of the new, although he also emphasises the radicality of the horizon that the event opens; he is not just concerned with the happening of the event but what happens after it. Badiou offers an ontology of the event consisting of the terms 'site', 'singularity' and 'event'. Every event has a site, a time and a place, which is the beginning of a rupture in a historical situation (Badiou 2010: 206); this rupture consists of the disruption of pre-existing norms (ibid: 208). Singularity refers to the unfolding of this rupture, the appearance and disappearance of its consequences (ibid: 209); this kind of singularity can be weak or strong but only the latter picks out an event (ibid: 210). Weak singularity gives us a natural or neutral situation; these are facts and not events (Badiou 2005: 177-78). Strong singularity means the bringing into the world of something that had not previously existed (Badiou 2010: 217): 'So, what I'm basically saying is that an event *has, as a maximally true consequence of its (maximal) intensity of existence, the existence of an inexistent*' (ibid: 222). This is a violent paradox that mirrors the violence of the event. Badiou's examples of events are, like Lyotard's, bloody revolutions, terrorist attacks, etc., and so both

theorists' conceptions of the event involve violence. The event creates a new possible (rather than realising something that is already possible). So, for Badiou, the event is a radical change; it is both a disruption of the normality of things and the creation of a new horizon beyond the unfolding of the event itself. This latter point gives Badiou's account a notable political dimension, that is, the evental site is a rupture that brings into being new political conditions (2010: 208).

Both of these theorists give accounts of the event that would mark them out as the sorts of "headlines" of the past' famously discussed by the social historian Fernand Braudel (1995: 1243); both emphasise the sorts of violent eruptions that so frequently make the headlines; and both place the event firmly in the political realm. If we want to look at them from an ethical standpoint then we need to subtly change stance. Events such as those mentioned above can be read both in terms of political and ethical consequence and the objective here is not to argue for the primacy of the one over the other. Rather, these two readings coincide but without an ethics of the event we lose sight of the latter. What I suggest is that where political theorists emphasise violence we should emphasise suffering; and where they emphasise historical magnitude we should emphasise the magnitude of suffering. A major terrorist attack, say, when we consider its violence – agentive acts of violence rather than instances of suffering – the question is one of justice; when we consider its grand historical significance, it leaves the individual helpless to intervene: response is seen as a political responsibility. But if we emphasise suffering and the magnitude of suffering then we are talking of events that compel the individual to respond to alleviate that suffering: response as moral responsibility. Again, both political and ethical readings occur simultaneously; the distinction is one merely of emphasis. From an ethical theorist's perspective it is this suffering that should be emphasised rather than violence. As we shall see, we will yet need to return to the work of Lyotard to understand the event – with some inflections from Badiou's ontology – but, as with Chapter Three, in a way that reads this work alongside that of Levinas in order to develop a rounded theory in the liminal space between the two. As such, in what follows I will return to Levinas in order to argue that the event can be understood as a collection of ethical events that demand a response to alleviate human suffering. Again, it should be noted that this is not to offer an alternative to political readings but –

since the ethical is missing in these influential accounts of the event – to provide a complimentary ethical account.

### 5.1.2. *Responding as an Event*

If the event is that which disrupts the established order of things, a fleeting moment of chaos that leaves radical change in its historical wake, then that which is disrupted will also be rigid ethical structures, that which is chaotic will also be the moment in which moral decisions are to be made, and that which is changed is the very applicability of previously existing ethical theories. What we need is an ethics that works in the face of the event, in all its transformative and unruly dimensions, an ethics, in fact, without rule, that is anti-foundational. The event is never explicitly stated in Levinas' work and, indeed, we do not get an account of the experience of the kinds of events that become media events. What we do get, however, is the idea of moral response as an event and what I want to demonstrate in the rest of this section is that if we read between this event in Levinas and the account of events we find in Lyotard then we can emerge with a useful account of the ethics of the event.

Across *Totality and Infinity* (2007) and *Otherwise Than Being* (2008c) Levinas offers an ethics without prescription or guidance. There is no categorical imperative; no principle of utility; and no codified set of rules for achieving the Good. Rather: 'Responsibility is anterior to deliberation' (Levinas 2008a: 111). Universality, the greatest good, and prescription belong, for Levinas, to the realm of justice, to the political and not to the ethical (see the concluding remarks to the previous chapter). For Levinas, that which is morally good is purely the alleviation of the suffering of the other person. Universality means neglecting the singular; the greatest good for the greatest number includes the exclusion of the minority; and codified rules, as well as reducing ethics to a simple procedure (Rorty's 'algorithm' to recall the discussion of Chapter One), would involve ranking the others to whom we respond, since guidance about how to act morally needs must involve some sort of hierarchy of responses so that we could choose between competing demands (as in, for example, William Godwin's 'Famous Fire Cause', in which the philosopher argues that in a situation in which an archbishop and one's very own mother were trapped in a fire one would have to save the former;

see Philp 2009). All of which demeans the singularity of the suffering of the particular other. Such considerations can belong to a political realm of justice, where violence against the other can be tolerated, indeed is necessary, to achieve political Goods; but such considerations leading to any violence to the other, be it physical (allowing the other to suffer) or symbolic (excluding the suffering of the other from consideration), cannot belong to ethics (see Levinas 2006a: 90).

This is important in that it offers an ethical theory suited to the disruption, the radical chaos of the event. Morality, for Levinas, consists of taking responsibility for suffering in the encounter with the suffering other. This has a very practical, empirical element to it: we feed the hungry, clothe the needy, offer shelter to the homeless, and so on (see Levinas 2006a: 55). In each singular encounter with a particular other we move to alleviate their suffering. Each encounter is ‘an awakening’ to our responsibility (ibid); when ‘I’ encounter the suffering of the other it ‘imposes on me and I cannot stay deaf to its appeal, or forget it, [...] I cannot stop being responsible for [the other’s] desolation’ (Levinas 2006c: 32). We are moved, in the instant of the encounter, to act without hesitation, to respond spontaneously to the suffering of the other. Now, practicality is not the same as practicability. Since the encounter is so context-specific, a singular moment in a particular time/space, there can be no way of judging what action is appropriate. Nor can we ever be sure that we have done enough since there is no metric by which to measure this. Levinasian ethics offers us a lonely moral agent who must act without knowing how to act. This may not be guiding in moral action but does seem to reflect the difficulty of responding responsibly in a society without authority (in which God and the metanarratives are dead or zombies). If we consider the event then this account of ethics seems appropriate. How dare we assert that we are acting in a way universalisable when, say, the situation is so horrific that people are throwing themselves from the World Trade Centre? How can we judge in the moment what the greatest good is when, say, public transport is exploding around us in London city centre (7 July 2005)? All we can say is that we must help others who are suffering. This is spontaneous and instant – like the event. It is also, as any accounts of such moral responses show, momentous. For Levinas, to respond to the other in the encounter is itself an event, the ‘ethical event of sociality’ (2007: 207). It is the consummation of an

intimate relationship between the 'I' and the other, a closed society in which the suffering of the other is not tolerated.

It is important to note, however, that although such ethical events will be legion during the kind of events we are concerned with here the two are not the same. Indeed, the ethical event is both momentous and mundane. Every day we encounter others to whom we must respond. Since all suffering of the other is inexcusable, we cannot (yet) say that the event is more significant in ethical terms than the non-descript day, in which our responsibility is infinite in the sense that everywhere there is suffering to be faced down. The ethical event of responding to the suffering of the other, of encountering our own responsibility for the other in her anguished expression, is an 'extraordinary everydayness' (Levinas 2008c: 141). It is the brute fact of social existence that when we encounter the other we are, at the same time, initiated into the ethical event. This can be as banal as passing a beggar in the street and being moved to act or as momentous as New York fire fighters entering one of the WTC buildings to bring people out. All we can say of the event in terms of ethics at the moment is that it contains a multitude of private ethical events; at this point, our conception of the event is that it is no more momentous than the everyday – something which seems counter-intuitive and will be addressed presently.

### *5.1.3. Responding to the Event*

Levinas gives us an account of the ethical event that is everyday; he focuses not on the extraordinary but on the extraordinary as ordinary (the response to the other). What we do not get is a notion of the event as Lyotard or Badiou would understand it nor do we get an ethics of such events. If we relied solely on Levinas as our theoretical resource for understanding the ethics of the event then, since there are an infinite number of ethical events one should be open to *everyday*, the event cannot be experienced as the radical change in circumstances that it certainly is. If we, as individuals, are always already responsible then a terrorist atrocity, say, can change nothing here; ethics is already infinitely demanding, there is no *infinite plus*. There is nothing, therefore, in Levinas to mark out the event (again in the sense of Lyotard or Badiou) as ethically significant. Further, the Levinasian ethical event is an encounter between the individual



and the other person, a private or closed society. Rather than the event being a coherent whole the experience of which is shared, we get instead an atomised collection of ethical events, of one-to-one encounters. A crude example will illustrate all this. Imagine a bomb goes off in a rundown inner-city area at the heart of winter. This inner-city area is already marked by human suffering, deprivation leading to homelessness, drug abuse, violent crime, and so on. Imagine you are having a coffee down the street when the bomb goes off. As you walk down the street there are people who have been flung from the blast, badly wounded, but there are also homeless people freezing to death, pregnant women who will harm themselves and their unborn children irreparably if they cannot be helped off drugs, and, perhaps, the victim of a violent mugging that occurred just prior to the blast. In terms of one's responsibility, nothing marks out the bomb-victims from the others: you are called upon to alleviate all suffering and you cannot differentiate between what caused the suffering. In fact, nothing really marks off the bomb-attack as being significant in ethical terms since you walk down the street and respond to suffering where you find it, being called into private ethical events with each victim. If responsibility is infinite, if we are always responsible for suffering, and if that responsibility is always a one-to-one relationship then there is nothing to differentiate 'the event' (the more newsworthy bomb-attack) from the background of human suffering that is constant. It is like an Ishihara Test, a page of different-coloured dots where, for those without deficiency, somewhere in the middle are coloured dots that form a significant shape, like a number '7'; at the moment we are colour-blind, and cannot see from the overwhelming mass of human suffering a significant event that is constituted somewhere amongst the atomised ethical events that make up everyday existence. The event, as it stands, has no coherence in ethical terms.

So far we can give no specific ethical dimensions to the event: it is formless. What I think demands further reflection, in Lyotard's account of the event, is that cryptic passage reproduced above where he describes the event as 'devoid of figure' but 'really big however in historical nature'. How can an event be both 'big' and 'without figure'? The answer, I want to suggest, will supplement the Levinasian account such that we can speak of the event as an ethically significant coherent whole. Crucially, for Lyotard, in his recently translated *Enthusiasm* (2009), the event is experienced as a sense of the sublime. The sublime feeling involves a complete breakdown in the relationship

between thought and the object that is presented to the individual; she is overwhelmed and left despairing. The feeling of the sublime is awakened by ‘magnitude, force, quantity in its purest state, a “presence” that exceeds what imaginative thought can grasp at once in a form – what it can form’ (Lyotard 2004a: 53). The imagination is defied by the sheer size and intensity of the event. This is a violent act towards the imagination: ‘Sublime violence is like lightning. It short-circuits thinking with itself’ (ibid: 54-55). The imagination is taken to the limits of what it can present; it does violence to itself in an attempt to present what cannot be presented. The event, then is so big – too big, really – that we cannot give it form in the mind, its full dimensions cannot be contained in thought.

I think we should understand this in light of the difference in emphasis between Lyotard and Badiou: Lyotard is concerned with the event as it happens whilst Badiou is concerned also with what is changed afterwards. So Lyotard is arguing that the event is formless as it takes place, beyond our ability to fully comprehend its magnitude. After the event, I think it is consistent to say, we can surely analyse what happened in order to give some historical picture of the exact happenings of the event (Badiou’s position, presumably). But, since we are ultimately concerned with responsibility, that is, with responding to suffering as it is encountered, it is worth reflecting a little more on this formless event in the moment that it unfolds. If we cannot contain the event in thought then the witness cannot fully comprehend what is happening; *what is happening?* is a question of what information the event transmits, its content (see Whistler 2011). The event, however, is not given to us in information, its content too great to be contained. It is, as Whistler (ibid) observes, not about the ‘new’ (the communication of information) but about the ‘now’. Of course, we *do* attempt to give voice to what is happening as it happens but this will always necessarily fall short. To give it narration is to suggest an end that would make sense of the beginning and middle – and as no end can be predicted in the heat of the moment this is no more than a coping strategy, a refusal to look directly at the event in its sublime dimensions (Bennington 1988: 110; 160). The event resists representation and so to attempt to represent it is to communicate only a ghostly image. The question is not *what is happening* but *is it happening* (Lyotard 2004c: 90; Whistler 2011)? Badiou’s ontology is useful for setting up in the abstract what an event is; but in the chaos of its eruption *what there is* is opaque – we know only

*that there is*. Of course, events as Lyotard and Badiou define them, have historical consequences but we can narrate the *what happens* later. In the instant of the event, the chaos of the radically new emerging, we cannot imagine what will happen next. The causal chain of *if x then y* is temporarily replaced with *if z then what the hell happens next?* Or, to put it in Lyotardian terms, the *what is happening* becomes *is it happening?* Caught up in the event, since the normal sequence of things has been disrupted, what will happen next or what to do next is obscured, if not unfathomable.

Lyotard argues that what takes us away from the brink of nihilism, from this abyssal event in which chaos seems insurmountable, is *enthusiasm*. This should be familiar from the work of Kant (2008: 102), for whom enthusiasm was the willingness to bear witness to the sublime despite the pain it brings to the mind's faculties (see Chapter Three). Enthusiasm is not about cognisance of the object (the dimensions of the event) but about bearing witness to the unrepresentable (without form in the mind). The event is an unpredictable occurrence, chaotic and disorderly in its unfolding. It exceeds our ability to contain it in the imagination. We experience, then, not the beautiful, which is a symbol of the good and therefore comprehensible, but the sublime, that which is beyond experience – the infinite. Only through enthusiasm can we go beyond the paralysing horror of the event. The temptation is to look away, since what one would see is painfully appalling; but before the infinite is experienced humility, the feeling that here is something greater than one's own interests. From this humility comes enthusiasm, a compulsion to bear witness despite the fact this is against one's sensuous interest, that is, despite the violence involved in trying to think through the event. It is this that allows us to step away from the edge of the nothing. Lyotard takes the idea of the sublime out of the aesthetic sphere and makes of it a political demand. To bear witness to that which cannot be narrated, to that which is unspeakable, demands creative ways of expressing what has occurred, that do not do harm to the singularity of the event. This 'bearing witness', for Lyotard, at least, brings to the mind the idea of justice as anamnesis: the duty not to forget the event – or at least to remember that we forget. In this way the possibility of something happening next is reinstated; in this way a political project emerges from the chaos of the event. The event demands a response, but since judgement has been short-circuited by the sublime feeling, it is a response without guidance or criteria. All we are offered by Lyotard is the following rallying call: 'Let us

wage a war on totality; let us be witnesses to the unrepresentable' (2005: 82). This is a sort of *political enthusiasm*.

We do not get an ethics through Lyotard's treatment of the event in *Enthusiasm*. Rather, we get a political project of justice. Lyotard's account is of responding to the event rather than of helping those others who are caught up in the event. If we take the Shoah or Porajmos as examples of an event, then we can see that responding to the event, in Lyotardian terms, would be to bear witness to the extermination by the Nazis of the Jews or Romani respectively. Bearing witness here would be some attempt to express what happened without losing the singularity of the event. Despite being of the utmost importance, this does not cover the full demand of response. Bearing witness, at best, lacks urgency – and, at worst, sounds passive (see also Jean-Loup Thébaud's criticisms in dialogue with Lyotard in *Just Gaming* (1985)). During the event, moral response needs must be to the particular people caught up in it; some attempt must be made at the alleviation of their suffering. The notion of the sublime is not in itself ethical; it would short circuit any attempt to think through what is right or wrong. But if we ask what exactly is sublime about the event we can answer in a way that offers an ethics of the event. What is ungraspable about, say, the Twin Towers falling? Buildings have fallen down. Buildings will fall down. Buildings have and will fall down as a result of terrorism or war. What is unimaginable about the collapse of the Twin Towers from a political standpoint is the symbolic value held by those buildings, symbols of the West and of hegemonic neo-liberal capitalism; but in ethical terms, what is unimaginable is that they were full of people when they collapsed, that is to say, what makes the event sublime in this respect is *the unthinkable magnitude of human suffering*. Those jumpers provide a clue to the observer that the conditions inside the towers at those floors were unspeakably horrific, that the suffering they were subjected to was so great that jumping to one's death was preferable.

What I want to suggest is that if we read between the accounts of Lyotard and Levinas, emphasising moral response rather than political response or justice, then we get an ethics of the event. What makes the event sublime – and therefore both formless *and* coherent – is that the repetition of human suffering is so frequent and so great that it goes beyond our ability to imagine it. If we think back to our Ishihara Test then we can

say now that we are no longer colour-blind: in the middle of all those dots – each of which represents the inexcusable suffering of a human being – we can pick out a collection that combine to become a whole, we can pick out the shape of an event. Now, that is not to say that we lose sight of the outlying dots – the suffering of those in the event is, case by case, no more inexcusable than those outside of it – nor do we lose sight of the fact that the shape we can pick out is only a collection of dots: the event is no more than the sum of its parts, that is, individual instances of suffering. This last point is difficult and deserves greater attention. The sublime level of suffering that we bear witness to when we look at the unfolding of the event allows us to conceptualise the event as a coherent whole. We see that the suffering involved is related and immense; before such suffering all self-interest should appear brazen in the hopeless comparison. This *moral humility* initiates one's responsibility for the suffering that the event brings to the mind, like a bolt of lightning. One might then feel a sense of *moral enthusiasm* aroused by the event, a calling to respond to the suffering that is occasioned – and it is at this point that the coherence of the event drops away in terms of importance. Politically, one can respond to an event, through sanctions or retaliation; morally, one can only respond to the suffering of a person, which is an ethical 'event' in its own right. At this point, then, the event is atomised into that which gives it its ethical significance, the one-to-one relationship with the other person. The idea that an event has an ethical nature is only useful insofar as that event can be said to inspire humility and enthusiasm; the moment these are acted upon, the moment they become a response to alleviate the suffering of another human being, the event retires from view and we are left with the ethical event of responsibility that operates in a closed relationship between the responder and the sufferer. These individual ethical events are no different – and no more or less momentous – than the encounters with suffering that occur every day.

Let us return to our imagined atrocity. You finish your coffee and, passing a homeless man sat on a step laden with snow, give him your coat. A bomb explodes in a nearby building and, knowing that that building would be full at the time, it strikes you that the suffering will be great. You were on your way to visit a sick relative but it is obvious that this pales into insignificance: something appalling has happened, an event of great magnitude. You are compelled to respond to the event. You rush to the scene and see writhing bodies everywhere; you can only attend to one person at a time, applying

tourniquets or helping people to their feet or checking for pulses, whatever it is that the particular person requires. One-by-one you respond to the people before you, who call for your help. Ambulances begin to arrive. You feel you have not done enough but the paramedics convince you that you have done all you can and that it is now their responsibility. You leave the scene and start walking towards the hospice where your sick relative resides. On the way you pass a pregnant woman, obviously emaciated, who begs you for a crumb to eat; from the track-lines on her arms you can see that she has probably spent all her money on heroin or whatever needle-drug it may be. You give her the croissant from the coffee shop, the one you saved for later because it is your favourite. You pick up some grapes from a shop and continue towards the hospital. The lessons to be drawn from this little story are three-fold. First, that we can now pick out an ethically significant event but that it is simply a way of marking out something coherent – the suffering of the bomb blast – amongst a wider background of suffering (the homeless man, the heroin addict). Second, that one can be moved – through humility and enthusiasm – to respond to an event but as soon as you put that response into practice it becomes a one-to-one response to another human being and not a response to an event. Finally, that one's responsibility is an everyday affair and that, although events are eye-catching, one's responsibility is ongoing (such that tending to a sick relative remains as a moral demand despite the more extraordinary happenings of the day).

## **5.2. The New Media Event**

I have proposed the following ethical account of the event: responding to the other is an everyday ethical event; the event is an aggregate of human suffering that has become unimaginable, that initiates a feeling of moral humility which forces us to respond to the event (enthusiasm), at which point we are initiated into ethical events that do not differ in kind from everyday ethical events. In what follows I will examine the impact of new media on responsibility and the event, when the above account is borne in mind. First, I will examine Baudrillard's account of the image-event, rejecting the argument that hyperreality would neutralise the moral evocation of the event for those watching from afar. Second, though, I will argue that the application of Baudrillard's arguments to the

new media accessible to those actually caught up in the event brings to the fore new moral problems.

### 5.2.1. *The Image-Event*

If we consider the sort of landmark events that happen in one's lifetime then an obvious truism comes to the fore: rarely do we experience events 'from the ground', which is what the above account of ethics is concerned with; instead, for most of us, events like 9/11 or the Mumbai attacks of November 2008 were followed from afar through television and/or the Internet. Lyotard has argued that events cannot be narrated, which would mean that these media feeds are somehow lacking, and since Lyotard's work has been fundamental to the ethical theory put forward above this is a complaint we have to live with or work around. If the event cannot be adequately presented through the media then we cannot consistently argue that mediated events are evocative of moral humility, that they arouse in us the feeling that we ought to respond (enthusiasm). We should want to say that they do since the opposite would fly in the face of common reason. What we need, then, is to work from an account that explains how we experience the mediated event. Most famously, such an account has been offered by Jean Baudrillard.

Baudrillard's three orders of simulacra, set out in his *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1993), will be well known: the counterfeit, production, and simulation. The sign moves from being a simulacrum of something in the world (counterfeit) to a simulacrum of other signs (production) and, finally, to a simulacrum of only itself (simulation). With simulation technology becomes a generator of meanings. Baudrillard writes: 'Everywhere we live in a universe strangely similar to the original – things are doubled by their own scenario' (1994: 11). We have simulated the world, creating competition for reality by offering something 'more real than reality' (Baudrillard 2008: 30): the hyperreal. This is reality in High Definition (HD) (ibid: 31). This doubling is, essentially, an intensified production of the real that results in hyperreality (Gane 2000: 34). The media have directed 'the mutation of the real into the hyperreal' (Baudrillard 1994: 30). Television was perhaps Baudrillard's primary target, observing how our perception of reality is a perception of its mediated hyperreality: 'it is TV that is true, it is TV that renders true' (ibid: 29). Nothing is separate from its televisualisation as

reality becomes inseparable from its image (Gane 2000: 40-42). This media environment has edited and shaped our experience of reality, such that our reality becomes simulated. This, then, forms the background for Baudrillard's later reflections on the event.

In his *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2003) Baudrillard, provocatively, discusses 9/11. The collapse of the Twin Towers, he writes, registered in the collective psyche as an 'image-event'. This was not, for Baudrillard, the return of the real and the end of the hyperreal. He writes: 'The collapse of the World Trade Center towers is *unimaginable*, but that is not enough to make it a real event. An excess of violence is not enough to open on to reality. For reality is a principle, and it is this principle that is lost' (ibid: 28; my emphasis). Instead of an image of the real, the footage of the collapse is an image with the real added to it. It was first-and-foremost a 'Manhattan disaster movie' (ibid: 29) lived out, a combination of cinema and terrorism. As Baudrillard observes, 'terrorism would be nothing without the media'; 'the media are part of the event, they are part of the terror' (ibid: 31). As such, Baudrillard talks of the 'image-event' (ibid: 27), the inextricability of the event with the image. The event instantaneously becomes an image-event, understandable only as a media object. This image-event, then, is hyperreal: once more the image precedes reality, the event dependent on its media image. 9/11 as media event is 'to substitute, for a real and formidable, unique and unforeseeable event, a repetitive, rehashed, pseudo-event' (ibid). 'Like the Gulf War: a non-event, an event that does not really take place' (ibid: 34; for his account of the Gulf War of 1991 see Baudrillard 1995). Baudrillard already noted, in his *Transparency of Evil*, 'the terroristic hyperrealism of our world, a world where a "real" event occurs in a vacuum, stripped of its context and visible only from afar, televisually' (2009: 90). 'No event is "real" any longer' (ibid: 80) because there can be no event separate from the image-event – no event that is not already an image-event.

As Baudrillard observes, 'the whole system of information and the media is a gigantic machine for producing the event as sign' (2001: 132). The impact of the media presentation of the event is that '[t]he singularity of the event, that which is irreducible to its coded transcription and *mise-en-scène*, that which quite simply *makes it an event*, is lost' (ibid). This has two effects: first, the event becomes exchangeable, perhaps



substitutable, with other events; and, second, the event becomes a non-event. Hence media events do not take place; 'they disappear into the void of news and information' (ibid: 133). Baudrillard echoes Lyotard's argument that the event cannot be narrated, adding that it can only be experienced as a real event (and not a non-event) if we free it from its media presentation and make some attempt to embrace it with the imagination. There is, for Baudrillard, a moral imperative to this setting free of the event: 'The excess of information creates an immoral situation in so far as it has no equivalent either in the real event or in our personal histories' (ibid: 134). That is, since we do not receive the real event through the media, and since we are not there, on the ground, to experience it first-hand, the event, for Baudrillard, no longer has any moral content because we cannot affect it.

Now, I think that this is patently false. If we follow Baudrillard's account of the image-event – and it is undoubtedly plausible and, we will see below, useful – it is by no means obvious that we must reach the same conclusion, that the image-event is, in effect, morally irresponsible insofar as it is not morally evocative. Baudrillard's problem, I would like to say, is that he too hastily rejects the possibility of an ethics of the media event and that he has no fully worked out account of the ethics of the event (any event, mediated or otherwise) to begin with. So, let us put the one forwarded above to the test with regards media events. It was argued that the witness to the event is confronted with an overwhelming magnitude of human suffering, before which she is humbled and enthusiastic to intervene. This 'overwhelming' was characterised as the sublime feeling. For Lyotard, whatever it is that makes the event sublime cannot be presented and so, like Baudrillard's image-event, we lose grip of the real of what is unfolding and have instead a pale imitation. That may well be the case but when considering the ethics of the event all that was of relevance was human suffering: should we say that this, since it reaches a magnitude that overwhelms the faculties of the witness, also cannot be presented through the media? It seems unlikely. The sublime does not exist in the world, it is a state of the mind, and so, if the media cannot present the real of the event, as Baudrillard contends, then it is of no matter: it would not have presented the sublime anyway. Rather, when we see images either of suffering (the Falling Man, say) or that are intelligible as unimaginable levels of suffering (the collapse of the Twin Towers) then we can say that the sublime feeling is evoked in the

mind, it pains the imagination to attempt to comprehend the levels of suffering involved. If the sublime feeling is a state of mind then it can be evoked whether the witness is at the scene or in an armchair – and the latter position is the only way most of us will ever bear witness to an event like this. These occurrences are beyond the register of the everyday and so when we watch them unfold on television or YouTube or by whatever means, it is hardly surprising that they lack reality. Except, the reality of human suffering is familiar to all of us; it is a constant of the human environment and responsibility for alleviating it, if we follow Levinas, is constant too. It is no surprise that the image-event, as Baudrillard (and Slavoj Žižek (2002), too) claims, is evocative of the Hollywood blockbuster, since we lack other reference points for the singularity of what is taking place elsewhere; but the suffering that it brings to the mind is at once beyond comprehension and evocative of a familiar human reality. In short, the image-event – regardless of hyperreality – is morally evocative.

My divergence from Baudrillard should be made explicit. Where Baudrillard describes the irresponsibility of an image-event akin to forms of entertainment – films but also perhaps, as with *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*, video-games that also depict such scenes – I emphasise the responsibility they evoke. Nonetheless, the inability of the viewer to respond, which Baudrillard finds problematic, remains. The difference, then, is that I think it is rather too hasty to dismiss the image-event simply because the ‘I can’ of moral action, discussed in the previous chapter, is not applicable. As with the conclusions of that previous chapter, we can say that moral enthusiasm can be transmitted through the image but moral action in the opposite direction cannot, such that the kind of immediate response discussed above in relation to Levinas is not possible. This does not make the image-event itself irresponsible; instead, it shows that our extensive networks of information flows do not necessary lead to good deeds. We might conclude, as do Adorno and Horkheimer (1992: 144), that the ‘culture industries’ have no moral function and act only to present these events to us as entertainment – something I will return to in Chapter Nine – but that observation is not transitive to the image-event itself. If the medium enforces voyeurism then the problem lies with one’s ability to respond and not with one’s moral enthusiasm evoked by the image-event; there is moral responsibility even if there is not moral action (which was considered a practical limitation to responsibility in Chapter Four).

So, the event presented through the media is just as capable of arousing in the witness that moral humility and enthusiasm that would motivate her to respond, to alleviate suffering. Of course, given that the witness may be in a location distant to wherever the event is unfolding her ability to respond may be severely limited – as was explored in the previous chapter. It is enough, though, to argue that such images are morally provoking: the moral agent's ability to act on them is her own business. Levinas' ethics is one of infinite demands to which one always falls short and so a demand to respond where one simply cannot is cruel but consistent. However, we should not imagine that those privy to image-events are all relaxing in living rooms far from the action; with new media, and especially with new media applications for mobile phones, it is possible to be caught up in the event and to follow it through a media feed. Baudrillard never suggests that the event does not take place or lacks reality for those within it, only for those watching it at a remove. What needs to be addressed now is how new media can collapse the two, such that the actor in an event is also a spectator to its media-image, and to this end I will consider the Mumbai Attacks of November 2008.

### *5.2.2. The Actor-Spectator*

Reflecting on the Mumbai attacks, Tania Roy has argued that new media create a global audience of 'spectator survivor[s]' (2009: 322), of witnesses who follow the unfolding of the event as it happens. These, then, are like Baudrillard's witnesses to the image-event except that that the breadth of coverage and its presentation in real-time means that the spectator today can invest themselves so thoroughly in the coverage that the event is endured – hence survivors. It is worth recalling some of the details of the Mumbai attacks in order to see quite how widespread and important the use of new media is during an event nowadays. The headline is that ten terrorists stormed Mumbai in November 2008, massacring 172 people in 60 hours (and the speed of this assault is worth reminding oneself of throughout what follows). Images of the attacks allowed a global audience to keep up with the event in real-time. The photograph-sharing site Flickr beat traditional news sources to present the first picture of one of the attackers (Kaplan 2009: 305). The micro-blogging site Twitter became a focal point: "Hospital update. Shots still being fired. Also Metro cinema next door" tweets mumbaiattack. "Blood needed at JJ hospital," adds aeropolowoman, supplying the numbers for the

blood bank' (Shactman 2008 in Kaplan 2009: 302). With Twitter, the way that people caught up in the attacks were organising themselves became part of the media feed for those following the event from afar. Within hours of the first shots being fired there had been set-up a Google map of the city with hotspots highlighted, and Wikipedia was keeping a similar pace, presenting updated information in real-time as well as photographs of the attackers (Kaplan 2009: 305). Like 9/11, television played its part in presenting the event, as rolling news carried the story through the entirety of the attacks. We have, then, an image-event but it is an image-event for a new media age, where information is updated constantly, where armchair editors can piece together testimonies and annotate images or maps. What is so apt about Roy's notion of the 'survivor spectator' is that new media allows the distant witness to participate in the event by organising the information or – as in the case of blood transfusion retweets – to use the medium to affect the course of events. The presentation of a new media image-event, in line with the argument above, is morally evocative and within the witness emerges responsibility but we can also go beyond this and more easily see how moral responsibility can become moral response, since the spectator can now contribute by bearing witness, as Lyotard would say, in a pro-active way: by posting information that could help others.

We should also consider, however, that not all of the spectators would have been so removed from the action and that if those spectators from afar can be morally helpful then it is only because those caught up in the event have access to the same new media. If retweeting information about blood transfusions is to be useful it is only because those who are local and so can give blood can follow it; if annotating a Google map with information about where terrorists are active is to be useful, beyond providing a record for posterity, then it is because the people 'on the ground' can learn where not to venture. Given the location of the Mumbai attacks – taking place in perhaps the most Westernised city in India – the spectators were local too, given the accessibility of new media and rolling news. When we consider the actors at the heart of the attacks we must recognise that they too are 'spectator survivors' – or, rather, *actor-spectators*, given their contemporaneousness with the attacks (they were survivors after the fact but actors as the event unfolded). Television was a vital source of information to the inhabitants of Mumbai (Kaplan 2009: 304). Steve Vincent, a British tourist caught up in these events,

described ‘absolute chaos, pandemonium on the streets’ (BBC News 2008b) but at the same time, Sajjad Karim, a British MEP, recalled watching events unfold televised on Sky and BBC News in the Taj Mahal hotel restaurant (which was under siege), including stories about himself (Frangoul & Scott 2009). As Benjamin H. Bratton notes, Twitter was used by those trapped in the hotels and cafes ‘to piece together their own tactical situation’ (2009: 330). Mark Abell, trapped in his hotel room, tells how he began to comprehend his situation: ‘I was communicating on my BlackBerry with other people who were in a similar position and we slowly started to get a picture that we would be evacuated’ (BBC News 2008a). The actor’s response to an event becomes a spectator’s response to the media-feed – and vice versa. New media allow those caught up in events to follow them as spectators, and so I talk here of actor-spectators. The actor-spectator responds to an image-event.

So, even for those on the ground we can say that media coverage and the reality of the event collapse into each other, given the ubiquity of smart phones and the new media accessible through these mobile handsets. The idea of an ‘actor-spectator’ suggests a completely new way of being-in-the-event such that I believe it is an important concept for considering the ethics of the event. It is worth thinking through, at a theoretical level, what the impact of this might be. Where Lyotard and Baudrillard argued that the media could not adequately present the reality of the event I was quick to argue that this is of no mind so long as the reality of human suffering at least is conveyed. This, however, was because the spectators could not really be expected to do much about the event given their remove from it; it was sufficient to argue that the image-event was morally provoking. Now the spectators might be those people whose response to the media-feed is vitally important, since they are people who might respond to or prevent the suffering of others. The actor responds to the suffering of the other within the disorder of the event’s unfolding – but they can judge their actions based on the imposed order of a media narrative that cannot hope to do justice to the singularity of what is happening. Order is seemingly restored by the ability of the actor to place herself in a meaningful media narrative even though the reality of the event is that all meaningful narratives have been disrupted, that we cannot place ourselves at a point on the continuum of beginning-middle-end because, as Lyotard argues, something is happening that is not tautological with what has happened. It is radical and chaotic and

this can never be adequately represented by the media because, by their very nature, they work in information, which by nature must be coherent and comprehensible. With new media the actor-spectator now reacts to the image-event they create by utilising and combining various media feeds rather than acting in the event itself. This shifts the locus of moral response from the contingent and spontaneous event to the media presentation. This presentation reinstates the chain of causality, as the media narration offers the '*if x*' that the actor-spectator responds to with the '*then y*'; she can now react to the image-event as if following an order or system, following the media coverage for guidance as to how to act. The worry is that, since the reality of the event can never be presented adequately, the outcome of actions made in the environment of the event may no longer tally with the judgements made from new media sources. That is, what may be the correct response given the information available through the new media may do more harm than good when put into practice.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Will Pike was a British tourist staying at the ill-fated Taj Mahal hotel in Mumbai. Trapped in his room with his partner, Pike describes being initially paralysed by confusion, uncertain of how to act as gunfire and grenade-blasts ruptured the normality of their stay (BBC Worldservice 2009). Later, Pike reports hearing single gunshots '*as if* gunmen were going into every room executing people' (Frangoul & Scott 2009; emphasis added); this '*as if*' is crucial, highlighting the monstrosity of the imagination trapped in the middle of the violent event – after all, how can we conceptualise what is, as it unfolds, formless? In the midst of this confused scene the inability to make a decision cripples action. But then Pike telephones his family, who have been following the event on television and new media platforms back in Britain. His brother gives him a 'clear' picture of the event – gunmen executing British nationals, the hotel on fire – and Pike resolves to take action, constructing a makeshift rope so that he and his partner can make their escape through the window. He falls and is paralysed from the waist down. Seeing this, she remains in the room, and is later rescued, unharmed. Tragically, if Pike had remained with his partner, he too would have shared in this positive outcome. An example such as this – and one can imagine many more scenarios in which

the amalgam of images and events, and of actors and spectators, confuses moral decision-making, creates existential uncertainty – represents a moral problem, since it suggests a complication in the response to suffering.

In sum, I have attempted to sketch out an ethics of the event. It was argued that encountering the suffering of another person is an event in an ethical sense, since it is from this everyday occurrence that moral responsibility – and therefore response – is initiated. It was then argued that the event, such things as terrorist attacks (which have been the predominant focus but we should also bear in mind here that natural disasters and revolutions, for example, also apply), has ethical significance in that it presents to the mind something violently unimaginable: the appallingly massive suffering of others. The attempt to comprehend this shows the limitations of our mental faculties, and we experience a feeling of humility. Humility becomes enthusiasm when we realise that we are experiencing something greater than ourselves, enthusiasm being the attempt to respond to the event. Since we are considering ethics and not politics, the idea that enthusiasm is *bearing witness to the event* in Lyotardian terms was replaced with *responding to the suffering of others*, which is consistent with it being suffering that evokes the feeling of the sublime from which humility and enthusiasm are derived. At the instant that one is moved by witnessing the event to respond to a suffering person, the event itself is no longer as significant as the ethical event (responding to the other) as described by Levinas: it has done its morally evocative job. It was further argued that media events, as described by Baudrillard, were also morally evocative. Despite the fact that the media can never properly convey the formlessness of the event, they have no problem presenting to us the suffering of others which creates humility and a desire to respond – even if response is not possible. Finally, it was argued that we can identify with new media a shift from being moral actors to actor-spectators, since those on the ground during events can follow them simultaneously, in real-time, using smart phones and other available media. This, in theory, presents a problem: if we respond to an image-event that cannot hope to present the reality of the event itself when we are in said event, then can we say with certainty that these responses will be correct? Poor Will Pike's attempts to rescue his partner, and himself of course, is just one example of the confusion that arises from attempting to alleviate the fundamental confusion of the event's unfolding using new media. Further empirical research would be desirable in

order to fully explore the impact of becoming ‘actor-spectators’; the purpose here, however, was simply to sketch a theory of the ethics of the event in a new media age and the kinds of moral problems it would help bring to the fore. I will return to such media events in Chapter Nine in order to conclude upon what they tell us about the ethical significance of time and space; and, since we have seen in this and the previous chapter that responsibility evoked through images can still result in voyeurism, I will argue that we should not be surprised that this fruit of informational capitalism does little to encourage moral good.



## 6. PROXIMITY AND URBAN FEAR

Cities offer excitement. Urban spaces are hotbeds of culture, of vital encounters and stimulating unpredictability. At the same time, so too are they breeding grounds for fear, for fear of crime, of random incivility and of the contingency of social confrontations. The gated community symbolises this provocatively. Gated communities are the centre of a network of mobilities to other privileged sites. They are also nodal points in a virtual network, technological connectivity being essential to their physically isolated existence. Gates and walls, security guards and CCTV cameras, are testament to the idea that proximity to others is not solely a ‘compulsion’ (Boden & Molotch 1994), that it can sometimes be repulsive. We saw in the previous chapter that to encounter the other is an ethical event; in this chapter, we will explore how and why we might attempt to control such encounters, to withdraw behind the gates in order to stop such events taking place. This will not only equip us with an offline precedent with which to understand online disassociation in the next chapter but, as urban space and new media intersect – and, indeed, we can talk of gated communities as virtual communities also – this will prove valuable in itself for understanding ethics in the new media age.

First, I will introduce the Wynyard Park development in the North East of England, a site of what we might call ‘total gating’: a combined gated residence, workplace and leisure space. My purpose here is not to give a detailed case study but, rather, to tell the story of what strikes me as an extreme extension of the gating phenomenon – in the area in which I live – in order to subsequently make some theoretical observations about proximity and responsibility. Engaging with the wide body of literature on gated communities and networked urban environments, I will highlight ‘fear of the other’ as an oft-cited motivator behind the move to gating that nonetheless remains underdeveloped. Second, in order to meet the demand to fully articulate this fear of the other, I suggest a radical reading of Emmanuel Levinas’ ethics of the other. It will be argued that Levinas’ other – transcendent, unknowable – is a source of fear as she threatens the ontological security of the ‘I’ (or individual) in confrontation. The other is further repellent because of the demands she makes of the ‘I’ to enter into social commerce, to direct herself towards the other morally. As such we can expand on the

notion of fear of the other found in gating literature with recourse to a two-fold ontological insecurity: that posed by the unknowable Levinasian other; and that which is fundamental to the ethical event. Such a reading is faithful to Levinas' conception of the other but goes beyond this by following to their logical conclusions the negative dimensions of co-habiting with others so conceived. Finally, I will argue that the ethical theorist needs to take account of our repulsion to proximity and the ways in which we negotiate it using new technologies that allow for a selective disassociation. This is something that one would not find in the work of Levinas and so I turn to Paul Virilio's writings on 'the spastic' – the individual who manipulates technologies to shut herself away from others – in order to ask what it can add to our understanding of contemporary responsibility.

### **6.1. Total Gating**

Near Billingham in the North East of England is Wynyard Park. The village of Wynyard itself is part of the sprawling urban conurbation of Teesside. Together with Middlesbrough, Stockton-on-Tees, Billingham, Redcar and Ingleby Barwick, Teesside is a sizable urban area with a population of 365,323, according to 2001 census data. If we add to this the towns of Eaglescliffe and Yarm – contiguous to Stockton and Ingleby Barwick respectively, as well as to each other – then that population increases by 18,335. Although, by population, it is one of the smaller conurbations in the UK, it is in this urban environment that Wynyard Park Ltd has positioned their mixed-use development: a combination of business park and residential area, targeted at the aspirational middle-classes. The site is still in development and, whilst the business park is already in use, at the time of writing the residential area is yet to be constructed.

The area of Wynyard is already home to a gated housing estate, the location of which Wynyard Park Ltd plan to take advantage of whilst construction is ongoing. As the developers emphasise, '[t]he North East's most exclusive private housing development is literally a stones [sic] throw from Wynyard Park';<sup>11</sup> namely the Wynyard Hall estate,

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<sup>11</sup> All references to Wynyard Park come from the online brochure available here: <http://www.wynyardpark.com/>

currently home to millionaire entrepreneurs and footballers past and present. This may only be a temporary endorsement until Wynyard Park's own 'exclusive housing' – the Wynyard Park Estate – is in use. In their own words:

Wynyard Park is an exceptional site ideally situated in the heart of the Tees Valley in the North East of England. The site provides businesses of any type or size with a fantastic opportunity to establish them selves within a prestigious development that is designed to balance Lifestyle, Living and Business perfectly.

This coupling of living/lifestyle with business is central to the Wynyard Park ethos, as they seek to mesh the domicile with the workplace, and boast 'a standard of living that is unsurpassed' and 'the very best in both country and urban city living'. Also integral then is the privacy of suburban life coupled with the vibrancy and connectivity of city life. Transport links to the surrounding areas are emphasised but the developers also highlight the proximity of local leisure facilities ('health clubs, championship golf courses, internationally renowned sports facilities, shopping and nightlife') and plan for the construction of their own such facilities to service the planned 'exclusive' (i.e. gated) housing estate. The site will offer 'advanced' ICT infrastructure, as 'Wynyard Park Ltd are currently in discussions with a number of major ICT suppliers to ensure that the site is at the forefront of the latest technological advancements'. Also emphasised is '24-hour security with full CCTV coverage'. This security is to include road monitoring and patrols, whilst many of the roads will be private anyway. On the business side of things (if we can so easily separate this from the domestic) the Wynyard Business Park site provides office accommodation, warehouse facilities and storage and distribution centres. Security here is 'a prime concern' and consists of 24-hour guard patrols (365 days a year); a manned gatehouse; extensive site surveillance with all vehicles recorded entering or exiting the site and the use of infrared CCTV; building access control systems; and an on-site police station. ICT infrastructure is again highlighted as of paramount importance. The business park also boasts its own nursery, gym, pub and bistro, with intranet file-sharing available at the latter. Moving forward, the Wynyard Park 'master plan' is to create 'a sustainable community incorporating a mixed use to meet a vision of a site that facilitates work, leisure and living and provides a high quality of life and well-being'.

So: what we see here is a development that combines domestic space with commercial space; is to an extent self-contained whilst drawing on the surrounding urban conurbation of Teesside; is highly connected by physical and ICT infrastructure; and is strongly defended by gating, 24-hour security and CCTV. I suggest that this is an extreme type of gating – its logical extension – and so a useful site for exploring questions of ethical sociality in the urban environment, chief amongst them: what motivates this move towards total gating, the desire to live in a gated estate in the same development as one's gated place of work?

### *6.1.1. Gating*

Total gating, then, describes the combination of fortified residences, workplaces and leisure spaces, close in proximity and connected by defended commuter pathways. In what follows I will draw on the existing literature on gating in order to demonstrate that 'fear of the other' is one of the key motivating factors behind this phenomenon; that is, that the perceived social danger exhibited by the unfamiliar 'others' of the urban environment results in the desire to live and work in closely linked gated communities.

Fear of the other is only one amongst numerous motivations for moving into gated communities, whether 'mixed use' or not. Setha Low sets out a comprehensive list of factors in her *Behind the Gates* (2003), noting class, the search for community, finance (for example, maintenance of property prices or tax incentives), and fear of crime, alongside fear of the other. Whilst notable studies into class (Atkinson & Flint 2004; Low 2001), community (Bauman 2008c: 90-109; Wilson-Doenges 2000), finance (Low 2006; Webster 2002) and crime (Helsley & Strange 1999; Wilson-Doenges 2000) have added significantly to our understanding of gating, the notion of fear of the other has often remained underdeveloped.

With this in mind we ought now to ask: What accounts for this move towards the kind of total gating seen in the Wynyard case? We see in numerous studies, as well as in Zygmunt Bauman's synthetic work on community (2008a), as a motivating factor the preoccupation with the imagined need to avoid encounters with those people seen to be dangerous by virtue of difference or unfamiliarity. With the loss of permeability brought

about by gating comes the exclusion of the general populace, a restriction on the movement of unrecognised others, and so the imposition of a feeling of safety. There is, on the one hand, exclusion of others and, on the other, self-imposed exclusion or withdrawal. For the residents the aim is to create predictability and safety through disengagement:

The process of gating surrounds an attempt, in part, to disengage with wider urban problems and responsibilities, both fiscal and social, in order to create a 'weightless' experience of the urban environment with elite fractions seamlessly moving between secure residential, workplace, education and leisure destinations (Atkinson & Blandy 2005: 180).

Whilst the above passage mentions gating alongside the elite, we can see, as with Wynyard Park, the potential for use of such strategies by the aspirational middle-classes. Methods vary according to budget but the search for security seems to be prevalent across the spectrum. The sliding scale of forms of withdrawal begins with insulation (residential preference determined by personal identity), progresses to incubation (sheltering and the linking of home to places of work, leisure, etc.), and ends, in its most extreme form, with incarceration (total insulation – e.g. the gated residential/work area) (Atkinson 2006: 822-23). Progression through these strategies is a movement towards social homogeneity and disconnectedness. It should be noted that incarceration relates both to the aspirational or affluent who lock themselves in and the poor who are locked away with little hope of escape; the difference is the interconnectivity of the spaces of the former, as gated residential areas are 'live' (i.e. wired up to the information society) as opposed to 'dead' (i.e. cut off) (Lash 2002). So, there is a scale of strategies used to restrict the access of the unwanted, varying from symbolic to concrete methods of defending space:

- 1) Insulation: greater proximity to similar others;
- 2) Incubation: greater proximity, or more secure corridors to key sites;
- 3) Incarceration: reduced proximity to dissimilar or unknown others.

Across the spectrum these strategies have in common the creation of impermeability and an increasingly private lifestyle for those on the inside.

Crucially, the (fragile) feeling of safety created by gating seems to manifest itself as the evasion of unnecessary social interaction: ‘It is important to recognise that security is not aimed solely at protecting residents against serious crime but also meets an apparent desire to avoid day-to-day incivilities and random social contact’ (Atkinson & Flint 2004: 880); so, incivilities *and* unexpected civilities. The irony is that fortifying-up seems not to decrease fear; after conducting interviews with residents, Atkinson and Flint report that gating increases sensitisation to social dangers such that ‘fear of outsiders appeared to increase’ (ibid: 880). Anxiety about unsolicited encounters remains and feeds into the perceived need for fortification. Rowland Atkinson highlights the desire for spatial autonomy represented by strategies of fortification, a desire rooted in ‘a deeper strategy to manage contact with socially different or “risky” groups’ (2006: 819). He further notes that segregation is the result of deep-seated inclinations towards like-with-like interaction, and is reinforced by a similarly deep-seated ‘fear of otherness’ (ibid: 820). Needless to say, there is little interaction between insiders and outsiders. As Atkinson and Blandy note: ‘GC [gated community] residents do not mix at all with residents outside the gates’ (2005: 184).

Before we continue we should note the intimate link between this sort of fortification and new media technologies. That is, new technologies make the bunker mentality of these defended spaces more practicable than ever before. It is not only the CCTV cameras and high-end alarm systems – the most visible and audible features – that make it possible to live a life cut off from social ‘danger’. More subtly, new media technologies make living behind the gates more practical and more comfortable. Social media, online shopping, online newspapers, online gaming, teleconferencing, teleworking, and so on; all these things make *unnecessary* excursions into the world outside less likely. This is not to say that new media technologies lead necessarily to an indoors existence and to less frequent contact with others; it is only to say that for those with a desire to avoid contact with certain others there are options. And, as we have seen, there are people with just such a desire. For Wynyard Park ICT connectivity is paramount, with particular emphasis on high-speed broadband connections.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Following Crang, Crosbie and Graham (2006: 2553) I suggest we understand what is meant by ICT to include telephony, television, computers, etc. – and the interaction of these elements together. An understanding of how these new media technologies are used together will allow us to assess their impact upon the urban environment.

Ellison and Burrows (2007: 300) note that the disengagement from proximate surroundings is likely to be virtual as well as physical:

the development of inter-spatial networks of communication with others who possess similar economic and cultural capital, increasingly facilitated by the dramatic expansion of ICTs, conjures an image of ‘communities of the mind’, where social interaction is as likely to be electronic as ‘physical’ or face-to-face. Indeed, where it *is* face-to-face, such proximity will be the result of individualised journeys using private transport, taking ‘private’ families from one spatial locality to another with similar socio-spatial and cultural characteristics (ibid: 303).

Drawing on Robson and Butler (2001), Ellison and Burrows suggest that the urban middle-classes create a ‘virtual urban village’ in which ‘there is an awareness of others but not much in the way of actual interaction’ (2007: 301). Disengagement here is as much virtual as it is actual; evasion of encounters with others is as much about the use of new technologies as it is physical barriers and isolated commuter corridors.

So, this ‘sod-off architecture’ (Atkinson & Flint 2004: 882) of the gated community stands as a physical marker of the combined physical-virtual disengagement from the urban scene. Just as Manuel Castells (2006: 434-40) observes of what he calls the ‘mega-city’ (or networked city), the networked gated community may be globally connected but locally disconnected. The strategies described above illustrate the double-edged sword of virtual and physical withdrawal from a locality, highlighting the evasion of encounters with others perceived as sources of insecurity and fear. The biggest danger is that physical and virtual withdrawal marks a withdrawal from the public sphere in general, leading to apathy towards proximate spaces, the people in them and the city as a whole.<sup>13</sup>

### 6.1.2. *‘Bubbling’*

In exploring total gating we should not focus only on the mooring itself (the fortified homestead or workplace or leisure space); these fortified spaces are ‘protected nodes in a wider network that create a counterpart city with flows of affluent residents moving

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<sup>13</sup> Virilio puts the dangers of withdrawal somewhat poetically: ‘the world, the planet, is becoming a blockhouse, a closed house, foreclosed’ (in Virilio & Lotringer 2002: 88).

while cloaked from the observation of the majority of residents' (Atkinson & Flint 2004: 886). These protected nodes are linked by patterns of movement that are divorced from the social context. There is pronounced car use amongst the residents of these fortified spaces and they rarely walk anywhere. This is significant in that it feeds into the 'privatisation of mobile space' (ibid: 888). Taken to the extreme, for some residents the only public space traversed is that between their car and their destination (the office, shop or school). As such, their cognitive map of the urban environment results in homogenous contact and limited encounters with others; they move through 'shielded corridors' (ibid: 889). This represents yet further withdrawal from public space. Travel becomes 'shielded from interface by other social groups' (Atkinson 2006: 821). Movement is protected to and from gated residential areas; sports utility vehicles (SUVs), secure car parks, private roads, and semi-public shopping centres allow for 'passage in seclusion or near-invisibility' (ibid: 830). The insiders live in a separate world, leading a commuter lifestyle. Segregation extends from the fortified home out into public space. Eduardo Mendieta describes this exploitation and manufacturing of urban fear as a 'new anti-urbanism' (2005: 195). He suggests we add the SUV and the Hummer – 'a vehicle of war, a machine of escape and velocity in and through the urban jungle' (ibid: 195) – to strategies of gating as another element of urban fear. He notes:

The barbarians at the gates have mutated into the dwellers of the slums and ghettos of today's global elites. And if the defences are overrun and the gates collapse, the fleets of SUVs and Hummers are parked in the underground garages of these self-contained bunkers of late modernity, ready for the escape caravan (ibid: 198).

The SUV, when combined with the gated community, demonstrates 'the interaction between a desire for social homogeneity, predictability and status' (Atkinson & Blandy 2009: 96). These vehicles are seen to provide the sense of safety through 'hazardous' (unpredictable) spaces.

Atkinson (2006) has described the mobility of gated community residents as 'bubbled'; that is, the residents attempt to manage and minimise unexpected encounters with others whilst in transit to locations away from the fortified homestead.<sup>14</sup> These locations are

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<sup>14</sup> Phillips and Smith (2006: 899) also talk of moving in a 'protective bubble of air' in their study of urban incivility, demonstrating the intuitive value of the 'bubbling' metaphor.



very often fortified, or at least exclusive, themselves, leaving only the spaces (for us ‘places’, for them ‘spaces’) in between as ‘dangerous’ (read: strange, unmanageable, other).<sup>15</sup> As we saw with the case of Wynyard Park, fortified homes and workplaces are connected by private roads and private transport, and are monitored by CCTV. The whole site is compact, with all the desired services in close proximity to home and workplace. The result is that the occupiers will be able to commute (often short distances) without being bothered by others. As Atkinson and Flint note: ‘It is now possible for social factions to exercise unprecedented control over their experience of the city in terms of to whom, how and when social encounters are made’ (2004: 877). Bubbled mobility – a sense of remove and safety from the heterogeneous, unpredictable, and therefore dangerous urban environment and its inhabitants – makes total gating possible.

In sum, drawing on the existing literature on gating has allowed me to identify four key points for the present study: first, gating appears to be motivated, in part, by fear of the other (Atkinson 2006); second, this fear of the other does not decrease as the level of fortification increases (Atkinson & Flint 2004); third, total gating is made possible by ICT connectivity (Ellison & Burrows 2007); and, finally, the space in between fortified places (home, work, leisure) can be navigated in a bubble (Atkinson 2006), maintaining the fortification and making total gating possible.

## **6.2. Fear of the Other**

As we have seen, we can account for the move behind the gates with reference to fear of the other – but what is experienced with the other that instantiates this fear? Whilst fear of the other is noted by many researchers, what is required now is to work out quite what this consists of. Low (2003: 131) is correct when she states that this fear is difficult to express. Nevertheless, if it is to be of any explanatory use it must be in some way explored and articulated. In what follows I will attempt to expand on this notion of ‘the fear of the other’ by arguing that it is a bi-product of the encounter with the other,

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<sup>15</sup> See Flusty 1997: 48 for an excellent account of what he calls ‘interdictory spaces’: spaces that intercept, repel or filter would-be occupants.

as conceived by Levinas. The idea of the encounter as an ethical event was explored in the previous chapter. However, what I want to demonstrate here is that Levinas' account of this contains within it the grounds for evading such ethical events. It is first argued that Levinas' unknowable other is a source of fear by virtue of her ontologically insecure nature. It is further argued that this ontological insecurity should be understood as fundamental to Levinas' conception of responsibility. This is rather an active reading of Levinas' work, one that would emphasise the negativity with which one might view their own responsibility for others. By taking such an approach I will not only be able to account for the fear of others that motivates gating but also understand, in light of such disengagement, the ways in which certain groups respond to their responsibility for others.

### *6.2.1. Ontological Insecurity as a Source of 'Fear of the Other'*

What accounts for the fear of the other? From the studies on gated communities examined above we can see that, although it plays a part, the actions of the other (the potential for crime or anti-social behaviour) are not essential; rather, it appears to be otherness *per se*, the otherness of the other, that is the determining factor. One way of explaining this is by turning to Levinas, first by arguing that his account of encounters lends itself to a repulsive interpretation of the other; and second, by demonstrating that fear of the other can be explained by the ontological insecurity at the heart of Levinas' 'I'-other relation.

For Levinas, the other is always a mystery to the 'I' who encounters her. The relation of the 'I' to the other cannot be classified as a totality, a 'we'; to do this, there would have to be some way for the 'I' to escape the 'I'-other relation, retreating to a point where a 'we' could be observed (Levinas 2007: 35). This, of course, is not possible. 'We' means common ground, mutual understanding: 'we' are of a shared mind. Without this there is no commonality, only two isolated subjects, the 'I' never capable of knowing whether or not she shares motivations or intentions with the other. There can be no understanding between them. The thoughts of the other, Levinas writes, can never be reduced to the possessions of the 'I', that is, they remain hidden (ibid 43). Quite what

the other is all about escapes the individual's 'grasp' (ibid 39). All of which should be familiar from Chapter Two.

This position can be illuminated with reference to the film noir *Lady in the Lake* (1947), a reference that also highlights the repulsive aspect of Levinas' formulation of the encounter. Our experience of the other is perpetually like that of Robert Montgomery's Phillip Marlowe character: a narrow first person perspective that gives a dangerous nature to the other in proximity, as unknowable others loom close to the camera/eye – something that would be alleviated with a wider shot, a third person perspective. In reality there is no third person perspective, we are limited to the narrow first person point of view that gives only a surface image, allowing for no demystification of the strangeness of the other. In reality, as in the film, we are denied an objective view. There is only the limited perspective of the 'I': the proximity of others, whom we cannot know – know their narrative, back story, intentions – looms with menace. As Levinas argues, even in those close to a given individual there remains something impenetrable, 'the stranger in the neighbour' (2008c: 123). Whilst we tolerate this abyss of otherness in our nearest and dearest, it makes those with whom we are less familiar too contingent, too unpredictable to tolerate. When the residents of gated communities fail to put attributes to the others they fear it becomes apparent that it is the otherness itself, which is to say the contingent and unpredictable nature, of the other that is of the greatest concern.

When Low (2003: 131) states that the fear of the other found amongst residents of gated communities is difficult to articulate she is, to my mind, correct. However, she then proceeds to conflate this fear with racial prejudice (ibid: 133-52). This is, as she demonstrates, certainly an aspect of the fear but it does not take into account the desire to evade random civilities that we saw above (Atkinson & Flint 2004: 880), nor the fear of others sully the 'niceness' of one's area that Low herself notes (2003: 153-54). Reducing fear of the other to fear of a particular kind of other (Latinos or Blacks in Low's study) is to lose sight of the nature of this fear. It is difficult to express because it is not in fact fear of anything in particular. It is a fear that the other might trample the flowerbeds; fear that the other might have the audacity to ask for directions or spare change; fear that the other might burgle one's house or pose a threat to one's children.

Not that we should reduce fear of the other to fear of crime; as we saw above, fear does not decrease as crime does nor as security increases (Atkinson & Flint 2004: 880). This suggests that it is not the actions of the other that create fear but rather not knowing their intentions, not knowing what their actions could possibly be. It is, precisely, fear of *Levinas'* other, that alien, ungraspable entity with whom I share no common ground. From the limited vantage point of the house-holder – unknown others seen through windows, or at the darkest corners of the estate – outsiders appear to carry a threat by virtue of being unknown, their intentions beyond us, hence the motivation for gating: to keep them out. This vantage point becomes further removed with gating, the other now viewed through the CCTV monitor or through the gates, and so ever more distant and strange – an exaggerated ‘Phillip Marlowe-view’. Even neighbours are strange at heart, and so we also see the use of contractual codes of conduct within gated communities in order to keep the others *within* the gates at a tolerable level of sameness (Atkinson & Flint 2004: 881).

What I want to suggest, then, is that the other is feared because the other is a source of ontological insecurity. With the other I can share no common ground, she is not wholly in my site. This is to be understood, not physically, but ontologically. That is to say that the other escapes my capacity to know *what there is* with regards the other. If no totality can be formed then the other remains transcendent, an encounter with the other is an encounter with infinity (which is, for Levinas, the opposite of totality, that which escapes understanding). It is my contention that this transcendence is a threat to the ontological security of the ‘I’; if the other remains transcendent then the ‘I’ cannot know comprehensively *what there is*. The other as such is unknowable and therefore unpredictable; the environment which others occupy or move through becomes insecure. The urban environment – occupied by these others, with whom encounters are also unpredictable – becomes dangerous. If humans desire stability and sameness, as Anthony Giddens (1991; 1997) has argued, then total gating is a logical response to this insecurity and otherness. The unpredictable nature of the other can be curtailed by minimising contact and maximising distance through gating and bubbling – in extreme cases, total. This, as we have seen, does not reduce fear but it does keep risk at a distance.

### 6.2.2. *Ontological Insecurity as an Event of Ethical Sociality*

I do not believe, however, that it is sufficient merely to explain fear of the other in the context of gating. Instead, this work should guide us as to how we understand responsibility today. The ethical theorist must be able to take account of the apparent desire to close oneself off from others, acted upon by increasing numbers when finances allow it. I will argue here that ontological insecurity is a bi-product of the ethical encounter, such that responsibility and the desire to evade the other emanate from the same source.

As Bauman (2009: 62-81) observes, Levinas' unknowable other and the 'I' are ontologically separate. Ontologically speaking the 'I' is only ever alongside the other; something must happen to bridge the gap, otherwise there could be no relation between the two – and this something must be beyond ontology. For Levinas this bridging event occurs in the encounter, where the other confronts the 'I' with its very exteriority. Presented with exteriority, the 'I' is called to leave the safety of interiority (the egoism or solipsism of the 'I') and engage with the other in the intersubjective realm. Levinas writes: 'the Other Person tears me away from my hypostasis, from the *here*, at the heart of being or the center of the world in which, privileged, and in this sense primordial, I place myself' (2006a: 74). In other words, it is the 'I' that bridges the gap by eschewing this imagined privileged position and directing herself towards the other.

This tearing away from oneself, this direction towards the other, is, for Levinas the event in which responsibility is grounded. The 'I' is confronted with the existence of the other in the encounter, exteriority posited against the interiority of egoism. We can speak of 'confrontation' here because the encounter of 'I' with other, interiority with exteriority, is experienced as resistance: here is another entity, an other with secret motivations and intentions. The 'I' can no longer behave as if in that privileged position, and so must instead limit her actions to take into account the presence of the other. By confronting the 'I' with otherness, with something other to the 'I', the freedom of the 'I' is limited. Demands are made of the 'I' to co-exist with others; the 'I' cannot behave as if she were alone, and so her powers and actions must be limited – 'the calling into question of my spontaneity' (Levinas 2007: 43). The very freedom of the 'I'

to act without concern for consequences is curtailed; the other must now be accommodated. For Levinas, this ruptures the egoism of the 'I', enforcing 'being-with-others' rather than 'being-for-oneself'. As such, the direction towards the other is 'the ethical event of sociality' (ibid: 207): the 'I' enters a world of others, of 'social commerce' (Levinas 2006b: 21) in which the freedom of the 'I' to act must be subjected to self-imposed limits (moral humility adopted, in the idiom of previous chapters). This prohibition is the responsibility for the other that constitutes Levinas' ethics.<sup>16</sup>

What I want to suggest is that not only is the Levinasian other a source of ontological insecurity, but so too is the ethical event in which Levinas grounds responsibility: the encounter with this other. The privileged position of egoism, of shunning the presence of the unknowable other, is the most secure of ontological centres. To be drawn out of this self-referential solitude and towards the other is to de-centre oneself, to open oneself up to all the contingent unpredictability of social commerce. Since we cannot know how the other will respond, directing oneself towards her in a gesture of responsibility is a risk. The other might take offence, or find this response injurious. The other might lash out, harm us. The intersubjective realm of Levinasian ethics is an unpredictable, insecure social space.

The other as resistance to the freedom of the 'I' is curious in the context of total gating; it would suggest that the operation of these fortified spaces is fundamentally backwards: the bunker architecture that physically resists the intrusion of the other is an exaggerated reversal of the idea that the other resists the bunker-dweller. It would also seem to explain, in part, the motivation for the construction and use of these structures; the sense of ontological security is maintained by this backwards resistance: *if the other resists me then I will resist the other*, seeking security in networked gated communities. The repulsion that motivates gating, the fear of the other, is derived from the two-fold ontological insecurity outlined above: the unknowability of the other and the risk of the

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<sup>16</sup> My reading of Levinas on sociality is informed by that of Bauman, who observes: 'We are not moral thanks to society [...]; we live in society, we *are* society, thanks to being moral. At the heart of sociality is the loneliness of the moral person' (2009: 61). Such a reading highlights the connection between the social and the pre-ontological, ethical movement that allows two ontological distinct entities – the 'I' and the other – to engage with one another.

intersubjective environment. Nevertheless, at the same time these two factors should be understood as grounding the responsibility for others.

### **Concluding Remarks**

John Urry (2002) has argued that the desire for co-present encounters shapes human mobilities. Despite the availability of increasingly ingenious technologies that offer virtual proximity – Apple’s iPhone 4 with its video calling, Skype, avatar interaction online, for example – we still take the time to travel out into what Don DeLillo calls ‘meat space’ (2003: 64), eschewing the virtual in favour of the fleshy proximity of the face-to-face. What Boden and Molotch (1994) called the ‘compulsion of proximity’ organises our mobility. However, what this does not take account of is the *repulsion* of proximity that is also felt, the negative response to the over-proximity of others. Slavoj Žižek (2008) has articulated this well. ‘What increasingly emerges as the central human right in late-capitalist society,’ he argues, ‘is *the right not to be harassed*, which is a right to remain at a safe distance from others’ (ibid: 35). We see this in the obsessive fear of harassment and random in/civilities noted of the gated community residents above, or, Žižek would add, in a society obsessed with stalking and sexual harassment. Fear of over-proximity, he observes, has become a major constituent of our subjectivity (ibid: 34). Paul Virilio, in his *Open Sky* (1998), understands this well. His notion of ‘the spastic’ not only evokes this repulsion to proximity but offers an original device for framing the response to it. Virilio’s spastic uses technologies to control her environment, minimising face-to-face encounters and leading to the ‘degradation of the physical proximity of beings’ (ibid: 58). The problem is that although Virilio understood this repulsion to proximity he could not explain it in the first place and this is where the reading of Levinas adopted above can come in. Proximity can be repulsive because the unknowable other is a source of ontological insecurity – fearsomely so – and because the encounter with the other demands that we limit our actions, act against our will, despite ourselves, which is to say, ‘for-the-other’.

Substantiated in this way, the usefulness of Virilio’s work is illustrated by the ‘total gating’ example. Total gating utilises urban, vehicular and ICT technologies to control

the environment of encounters. The gating and security of residential space provides what Urry (2003, see esp. 125-26; see also Hannam, Sheller & Urry 2006) would call a 'mooring' safe from random encounters, from within which the insider's mobility can be organised whilst the outsider's mobility is impeded. If places of work and leisure are included in the gated constellation then those places that are shared with others (the office, the gym) become safe moorings shared with similar others. Bubbled mobility utilising private roads and/or the tank-like Hummers or SUVs further prevents the random encounter, ensuring safe passage to those engagements with individuals whose proximity is compelling – for example, business meetings, which Boden and Molotch note are frequently face-to-face affairs despite tele-conferencing technologies (1994: 270-74; 2004: 104). ICTs allow for virtual engagement with privileged others whilst locked-in behind the gates, or moving within bubbles between private/fortified nodal points. What we see, then, are strategies of mobility organised around strategically situated moorings designed to allow for a *selective* disassociation. What we learn from focusing on total gating is that, because the encounter with the other brings clearly to our attention our responsibility, we might today, through the manipulation of technologies, seek to avoid certain encounters altogether. This is what we might call *moral spasticity*: the desire to control the environment of encounters through technology-use, resulting in selective disassociation and motivated by the fear of a repulsive other, whose repulsiveness is the result of a two-fold ontological insecurity inherent to the ethical encounter.



## 7. CIVILITY AND SOCIAL MEDIA

The architecture of the city, as we have seen in the previous chapter, can shape human interaction within it. Likewise, online architectures shape the interactions that occur between users of a given site or application. Papacharassi (2009: 200) and Lewis and West (2009: 1212-13) have made this latter point in recent articles that explore community and identity through social networking sites, and friendship on Facebook, respectively. Lewis and West's (ibid: 1215) observation that Facebook 'friends' do not map on to the user's actual friendship group, that they are extended social groups that include people on a sliding scale of familiarity from friends through co-workers to near-strangers, opens up the possibility of exploring social networking sites utilising the same tools one might employ if studying urban spaces, which more obviously contain those who are other than friends. How might the design of a social networking site facilitate the kind of selective disassociation introduced above, only this time in an online environment?

In this chapter I will focus on interaction with those near-strangers – people we once knew, or half know, or simply bumped into once – that, due to Facebook's nomenclature, are grouped in with the rest of our 'friends'. Since my approach here is to look at how the site architectures of social media impact upon encounters and influence certain forms of interaction, it is necessary to look beyond Emmanuel Levinas for theoretical guidance. Levinas' ethics approaches responsibility through a philosophical discussion of subjectivity – one that I have found throughout this work to be useful – but, although it includes an important empirical dimension of encounter, there is little to be found here that would help us to understand the environments in which encounters take place, nor the role of that environment in allowing for encounters or in dictating forms of interaction. For this reason I will turn to the liquid modern phase of Zygmunt Bauman's writings, which, as discussed in Chapter One, seem to have left behind his previous postmodern interest in ethics but, as I will explicate in Chapter Nine, can be read gainfully in an ethical context. Transposing Bauman's account of civility as *openness to the stranger despite their strangeness* from the city to the online environment, I will examine to what extent we can discern this openness in social media and what impact the architecture of social media has on our ability to encounter

strangers as strangers. I will build on this by examining two noteworthy social phenomenon: Facebook status updates and Tweeting – the delivery of short, often undirected messages on Twitter – and Facebook stalking. With discussion of the former, I will return to the work of Levinas on conversation in order to assess how the modes of communication encouraged by social media can be understood in terms of saying and the said; and with regards the latter, I will draw on Slavoj Žižek in order to understand the motivation for this unilateral virtual proximity, undercut by the absence of physical proximity and interaction. These two features are shown to channel indifference and voyeurism, respectively, towards strangers, and both are used to build upon the idea of the repulsion of proximity introduced in the previous chapter and to be concluded in Chapter Nine.

### **7.1. Civility and Online Architecture**

We find, in both the postmodern and liquid phases of Zygmunt Bauman's work, an account of the stranger that emphasises the fearful response of those who encounter them and the strategies used to avoid such encounters where possible. For Bauman, strangers (as potential stalkers or prowlers) are 'the ambient fears that haunt our contemporaries' (2008c: 93). He is, of course, primarily concerned with the strangers of the urban environment. Bauman's definition of civility is interacting with strangers 'without holding their strangeness against them' (ibid: 104). That is to say, without resenting them for their strangeness, without recoiling from their strangeness, and without demanding that they hide their strangeness behind some veil of familiarity. What Bauman's account of civility offers that, say, Ash Amin's (2006) does not is a focus on the individual project of mastering civility rather than on political notions of instilling civility in groups. This is more appropriate given the focus of the present work on ethics rather than politics. What is particularly interesting about Bauman's account is the emphasis he places on urban design and architecture. He writes:

Civility, like language, cannot be 'private'. Before it becomes the individually learned and privately practised art, civility must first be a feature of the *social setting*. It is the urban environment which must be 'civil', if its inhabitants are to learn the difficult skills of civility (Bauman 2008c: 95, my emphasis).

We should bear in mind the emphasis placed on ‘social setting’: we are not only talking of urban environments here. To be civil to strangers we not only require shared spaces but spaces in which we share common ends – and in which we do not simply pursue individual agendas. This is a question of, at least in part, design: the architecture of spaces will dictate whether or not they are conducive to civility (the gated communities of the previous chapter standing as a prime example of this).

In what follows I will first use Bauman’s account of how we encounter strangers in the city to reflect on how we encounter them online. I will then apply his maxim that civility requires civil space to examine the design of social networking sites.

### *7.1.1. From Strangers to Ersatz-friends*

For Bauman, ‘don’t talk to strangers’ has ceased to be merely advice given by parents to children in order to keep them from harm; it ‘has now become the strategic precept of adult modernity’ (2008c: 109). That is to say, avoiding strangers has been elevated to a necessary way of being in the contemporary urban environment. Moving around the city contains risk because there are others also doing so, in ways that are not predictable. Being unable to predict what these others will do is what makes them strangers (Bauman 1998: 126). We push these strangers into the background as we make our way around the city, confining them to the sphere of disattention – although, I would add, the very attempt to ‘background’ strangers shows that they are at the foreground of our thinking, something that was clearly demonstrated in the previous chapter through the ‘fear of the other’ that motivated gating. At the same time, we present ourselves to strangers only as a surface (ibid: 134). We are, as such, inaccessible (for conversation or any other sort of social exchange). As Bauman argues, only complete human beings can be socially significant to one another. We preclude any possibility of a meaningful encounter with others when we present ourselves only as a surface, displaying only a ‘bit’ of our character, or some facet of it, and when we attempt to relegate strangers to the background. As such, our encounters with strangers are mismetings, that is to say, not real encounters – more like glances (in the visual sense and in the sense of a brief contact). For Bauman (2009: 155) this de-socialises the social space and our capacity for being civil is diminished.

Might we find this kind of space – social, civil – online instead? The period in which Barry Wellman (see, for example, Wellman & Giulia 1999) famously studied social encounters through the Internet, the period that now corresponds to what is commonly called web 1.0, was marked by the enthusiasm of users for ‘meeting anyone from anywhere’ (Wu Song 2009: 136). Felicia Wu Song describes web 1.0 – including such formats as chatrooms, web-lists (like an asynchronous chatroom where users posted comments on topics, sought or offered advice on specific subjects, etc.), and various networking sites designed to bring together business or creative enterprises – as ‘visionary communal’. That is to say that web 1.0 was characterised by the endeavours of the users of such sites to create a community of strangers in which people could meet regardless of geographical proximity.

In retrospect, we might question whether web 1.0 really was characterised by the possibility of strangers meeting strangers. These ‘meetings’ were mediated to such an extent that it is difficult to motivate the claim that strangers are encountered in the meaningful way that Bauman characterises as civil. The presentation of a surface to others, noted by Bauman as a way of mismeeting strangers in the urban context, takes on a literal meaning here: the user presented herself to the stranger via the comparative safety of a computer screen. There was, as such, no real risk; the user was not vulnerable to the unpredictable actions of the stranger (apart from a dark turn in a conversation, say). This is not without psychic effect. This mismeeting was further enacted through the form that the encounter took, with users offering a profile, a snapshot of themselves, that offers only surface and gives nothing deeper, to stand in during interactions. In some instances the only presentation of self would have been a typed comment to a list or on a chatroom wall with a username attached – or not, if given anonymously. Further, Bauman’s observation that meaningful encounter cannot occur through the presentation of bits of ourselves is appropriate in this online context. First, the encounter is made possible here by the transmission of bits (units of information) between computers. Second, the content of that information needs must be ‘bitty’ too: one cannot have an online profile as large as one’s personality. Of course, repeated conversation online in a chatroom, say, would have led to more meaningful encounters; but how many strangers would be mismet first before someone came along that was worth such investment of time and emotion? This is no different to the uncivil

encounters in the city, despite all the rhetoric and blind hope of the visionary communal type (see, for an example of the visionary communal ideal in writing, Rheingold 1993).

The shift to web 2.0, with its emphasis on social networking and user-generated content, suggests a shift also away from the strangers-meeting-strangers ideal of web 1.0. (Twitter, which it could be argued is designed for strangers to follow strangers, often celebrities, will be dealt with separately.) After interviewing undergraduate Facebook users in London, Lewis and West note that '[n]o respondent reported joining Facebook in order to make new friends' (2009: 1215). They further observe, in this study of 'friending' (the activity of accumulating contacts on Facebook), that 'Facebook is a social networking site, and while it uses the term "friend", this encompasses a wide variety of relationships' (ibid: 1211). Since the number of Facebook friends a user has is often in the hundreds, it is apparent that the term can be applied only very loosely since it includes 'family, neighbours, people from one's current place of work, people from one's previous place of work, schoolfriends and networks from another person' (ibid: 1211). Of most relevance, the study indicates that Facebook friends include people the user 'might have met only once or whose faces are familiar but little more is known about them' (ibid: 1215) – people, in short, who are strangers. For Bauman (1998: 132), the stranger is someone who we meet with no expectation of meeting again; temporariness, the fleeting, is built into the encounter. I suggest that the ability to 'friend' these people on Facebook does not alter their status as strangers; rather, we have to acknowledge that the encounter with the stranger can now be revisited through social networking sites. There can no longer be an expectation of never meeting the stranger again, since they may well find you – and 'befriend' you – online, or vice versa. The stranger then becomes a sort of *ersatz-friend*. These ersatz-friends collected on social networking sites are the people that we are not familiar with offline and with whom no real friendship has been initiated online: the sort of 'friends' that are collected because that is what is done on social networking sites. Ersatz-friends: someone we met at a party once; a blast from the past, such as a former class mate, with whom we were never really friends; a friend of a friend (of a friend...); or someone we cannot even remember how it is that we are supposed to know them. Lewis and West (2009: 1215) divide Facebook use into passive and active, the former being idle browsing on the site and the latter being communication and interaction with other users. I suggest we use

this division in order to understand how Facebook ‘friends’ include genuine friends as well as strangers: with our friends we use Facebook actively, posting on their walls, engaging in instant messaging, commenting on their photographs, and so on; and with the strangers, the ersatz-friends, our relationship through Facebook is passive, lacking the social interaction of the former.

In what remains of this section I want to explore how the design of a social networking site might make it a hostile environment for those ersatz-friends, reinforcing passive interaction. Bauman observes several strategies for discouraging civility in the urban environment through the design of space, two of which I will draw on in this online context: emic place and phagic place.

### 7.1.2. *Emic*

The emic strategy ‘consist[s] in “vomiting”, spitting out the others seen as incurably strange and alien: barring physical contact, dialogue, social intercourse and all varieties of *commercium*, commensality or *connubium*’ (Bauman 2008c: 101). An emic place is a space that would keep the stranger out or into which the stranger is incarcerated. Examples of the former in the urban environment include gated communities and fortified business parks, whilst examples of the latter would include ghettos of various kinds (shanty towns, sink estates, etc.).

According to Felicia Wu Song, social media sites have an ‘open-door policy’ (2009: 49); that means that they are, essentially, public spaces. However, whilst much focus has been on social networkers’ loosened inhibitions in placing private content in a public sphere, we must not overlook how that public sphere has been first of all managed according to an emic strategy. Whilst, as we have already noted, web 1.0 provided open spaces in which strangers could meet strangers, it already contained the mechanisms with which to ‘spit out’ those who were too strange. So, on the message-boards of the 1990s and early 2000s could be found a set of filters that offered the user control over random encounters: friends lists could be set-up which meant that even in a public group the user would see only posts by approved-of users; and ignore lists meant that even if the user is generally open to the posts of strangers, they could none-the-less

single out those whom they did not wish to encounter (Wu Song 2009: 50-51). With many of today's social networking sites we see the adoption of these filters, whilst the old 'visionary communal' idealism has evaporated. The friends list is no longer an optional strategy but now *the* organising tool of social network formation for sites such as Facebook: the user starts with no network and builds it up by adding people via email contact lists or through manual searches. If all the users of Facebook were friends then there would be a community of 500 million-plus users (Facebook 2011c); as it is, the vast majority are rejected and the public space is *personalised* (not *privatised*) through friending. As such, the ignore lists have now gone: how could one list all the people being ignored on a site as popular as Facebook? Instead, deletions of unwanted friends by the user are now practised. So not only is the public space reduced to those the user knows (however well), to the exclusion of total strangers, but those known users can be 'spat out' – if, say, they behave strangely. The ersatz-friend lives a precarious existence.

### 7.1.3. Phagic

The second strategy of creating space unsuitable for engendering civility is phagic place. The phagic strategy 'consists in a soi-distant "disalienation" of alien substances: "ingesting", "devouring" foreign bodies and spirits so that they may be made, through metabolism, identical with, and no longer distinguishable from, the "ingesting" body' (Bauman 2008c: 101). A phagic place is a space in which the stranger cannot be strange, where the stranger is assimilated, their strangeness suppressed or stripped from them. Examples in the urban environment include gated communities once more, in which residents are expected to behave according to rules laid out in a legally binding residents' agreement, and, Bauman's (ibid: 99-100) example, shopping centres. This latter example deserves a little more attention before we proceed to look at phagic strategies online. In the shopping centre, the space is designed such that shopping is the only game in town. Whatever differences people possessed outside of the shopping centre are reduced to one, overriding sameness: consumption. Now, instead of an aggregate of different people, we have a mass of consumers. The space is designed such that there is no need or no opportunity for strangers to socialise with each other. Everyone is encouraged to go about their shopping with little consideration for the other people doing exactly the same and, indeed, since everyone is playing the same game

there is nothing to be discussed between them: ‘No need to negotiate since we’re all of the same mind’ (ibid: 99). This can be achieved by removing spaces in which one might loiter (i.e. not consume) or by more subtle designs such as uncomfortable benches (if you are sitting you are not buying!) (see Flusty 1997).

Analogous to the residents’ agreement in the gated community example is the code of conduct found on social networking sites such as Facebook. All users who sign up to such sites are signing up also to this code of conduct. The Facebook code of conduct states: ‘Although as an online service provider, we are not responsible for the conduct of our users, we want Facebook to be a safe place on the internet’ (Facebook 2011a). The protection of children and the prevention of bullying are obviously high on the agenda, but so too are injunctions not to be deceptive (e.g. not to lie about your age) or to be demeaning to others. Whilst the Facebook code of conduct claims to exist in order to protect the health and safety of the group, it appears to be largely in place to protect intellectual property rights and to contractually protect the owners from any legal responsibility for users’ activities. Users are obliged to behave in ‘appropriate’ ways, such that creative uses of Facebook – to become someone else online or to ‘mash-up’ copyrighted materials – risk the removal of one’s profile. You can use Facebook however you like so long as it is in exactly the same form as everyone else. This creates the sort of environment where people cannot deviate too much from the norm such that other users are safe and familiar rather than strange and, by virtue of strangeness alone, threatening.

It is unclear how Facebook moderates its user-generated content to ensure inappropriate material is not posted (pornographic, violent, or copyrighted images, say). We can be sure that they do as seen, for example, in the case of the removal by Facebook of student protest pages, amidst much conspiracy theorising, in the run-up to the wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton (Malik 2011). Facebook does not declare, however, how this ‘inappropriate’ material is identified and nor is its removal explicitly justified by Facebook when such incidences are highlighted in the media. However, we can look to other new media to see how moderation works. Contributors to weblogs or commentators on online news articles will be all too familiar with ‘the mods’, the anonymous moderators of content. Users of the Guardian’s online comment function,



for example, will often encounter the following message in place of a user's intended comment: 'This comment has been removed by a moderator because it didn't abide by our community standards'. This is phagic in the sense that it allows the poster who fell afoul of the moderators to continue to occupy that space, to continue to post other comments, so long as they behave as the others do, whilst the act of deletion of comments returns the space to its normative equilibrium. Again, it is interesting with the Guardian case that the idea of the protection of collective values or decency is invoked, rather than adherence to libel law. The idea of moderators as 'good neighbours' (Wu Song 2009: 54) is thus evoked, in the face of a stifling surveillance designed to consume aberrant users.

The effects of Bauman's phagic example of the shopping centre can also be identified online. Wu Song describes online groups in web 1.0 as 'porous' (2009: 65), by which she means that they are easy to enter and exit. This is a result of what she calls 'the phenomenological reality of cyberspace', by which she means the weakness of bonds to others brought about by the merely virtual encounter, as well as 'the organizational reality of [online groups'] components' (ibid: 67). This latter is of interest here and relates to the very little effort involved in joining an online group. On the face of it this is the case with social networking sites today. All that is necessary to join Facebook is a few small pieces of information: one's name, email address and a password. Of course, there is a lot more that the user can add, as a cursory glance at any Facebook profile reveals: work information; education history; favourite music, films, books, television shows, computer games; and a photograph of oneself. Fail to add any of these things, as I have learnt from past experience, and messages appear from Facebook in the blank spaces of the profile strongly suggesting that you do – even asking you to compare your own profile to named friends who have done it well. What this prompting suggests is that if you want to join Facebook in a profitable way (and here I mean 'profitable' for the user rather than for the owners and advertisers, which will be addressed in the next chapter) then you have to be willing to proffer a lot of information about yourself. This makes entry less easy than it appears at face value. Not only because the potential user may not want to offer up this information but because they may not be interested in any of the 'favourites' laid out by Facebook. The potential user may wish to express themselves in terms of other key points yet this not possible in the profile, which, as a

‘profile-avatar’, to recall the conclusions of Chapter Three, stands-in for the user in a way important to social encounters. So you can join Facebook if you reduce your *self* to a normative set of information chosen not by yourself. Entry, then, involves the consumption of that which is other about the user, a phagic process inherent in the design of the profile. As Levinas (2008c: 166) argued, ‘the unnarratable other’ loses her singularity (otherness) in narration. As noted above with regards the web 1.0 profile, the Facebook profile renders the stranger as a mere surface, a collection of comprehensible ‘bits’ – which is to say, they are forced to no longer be strange in order to participate.

What is the result of a Facebook full of profiles created according to pre-set categories of information about users? In the example of the shopping centre as phagic space, Bauman argued that the architecture of these places of consumption was designed to fashion all those within it as primarily consumers, which is to say, to make everyone the same. Sameness brings freedom from risk and insecurity. It also means there is no need for interaction, no need for meaningful encounter or dialogue since everyone is the same – there is nothing to be negotiated. If we all wear our interests as a set of information on a Facebook profile then what is to be negotiated? Of course, friends and family will continue with their social interactions, the active use of Facebook noted above – not to mention offline and through other media – but what of the ersatz-friends? The profile allows for a wholly passive interaction since the sort of information it contains is the basis of the kind of polite conversations we have with people we do not really know and so it removes the need to have that polite conversation with them. They need never be communicated with: just send a ‘friend’ request, wait for it to be accepted, and read the information provided on the profile, a profile which works like the surface presented to strangers in the urban context in order to avoid meaningful encounters and interactions with strangers.

## **7.2. Indifference and Voyeurism**

We see, then, that by applying one theory of civility to strangers in the urban environment (Bauman’s) we can begin to examine how the designs of the online environment impact upon our ability to encounter strangers there without holding their

strangeness against them or making them relinquish their strangeness. In the examples used above we saw that emic and phagic strategies can be identified, suggesting that meaningful encounters and interactions cannot be guaranteed. Civility requires the environment to be civil first, and this is a maxim that ought to be applied to the online environment as much as to the urban.

Against the claim that we avoid, by various means, the encounter with the stranger online might be posited two trends resultant from social media platforms: status updates/tweeting and Facebook stalking. These would seem to suggest, in the first instance, a desire to engage with more people than would otherwise be possible, including strangers, and, in the second instance, an unhealthy obsession with strangers. In what follows, I will argue that updates/tweets in fact demonstrate an indifference towards strangers whilst the online variety of stalking is an exemplar of the fears we hold today about over-proximity to strangers. These practises both belong to the passive side of the passive/active interaction binary on Facebook; they are both forms of interaction that would neutralise the strangeness of the encounter with the stranger online.

### *7.2.1. Tweeting*

One of the central features of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter is the space in which the user can offer a temporary self-expression: the status update or the tweet. The status update on Facebook, along with the wall (the space where users write to other users publicly), is one of the few ways in which the profile changes in real-time to offer some narrative of the user. Whilst the information contained on the profile remains more or less unchanged, only being added to in a list-like fashion when, say, new favourite books or television programmes are discovered, the update offers a glimpse of the user's progression through time/space. It can be used to express feelings, thoughts, location, activities, and so on. This information is conveyed, depending on privacy settings, to a closed group of 'friends'. Whilst we might criticise the banality of these posts – 'David is hungry'; 'David is eating a sandwich'; 'David is replete' – it is the form they take rather than the content that is particularly interesting. In a collection of fragmental thoughts collected in the first half of the 1990s Jean Baudrillard observed:

‘Telling any old thing to someone is to transform them into any old person. This is precisely what the news media do’ (2007: 6). Today, is this not precisely what the *new* media do? Facebook updates – but also blogs, comment feeds on news articles, etc. – are part of a web 2.0 culture of public disclosure, wherein users divulge any old thing to an audience of (usually) hundreds of people (i.e. the ‘friends’) who really become the one, from the position of the updater at least: a mass that receives this undirected condensation of thought.

Twitter takes this to an extreme. The tweet of Twitter is exactly similar to the Facebook update but the address has a different nature. The appeal of Twitter is that those same titbits of information are not solely readable by a closed group of ‘friends’ (although, again, privacy settings can be set such that they are). A tweet can be read by anyone who has a Twitter account, which is to say, by no-one in particular. We can understand the impact this difference in audience (from Facebook) has through another passage from Baudrillard:

There is nothing more mysterious than a TV set left on in an empty room. It is even stranger than a man talking to himself or a woman standing dreaming at her stove. It is as if another planet is communicating with you. Suddenly the TV reveals itself for what it really is: a video of another world, *ultimately addressed to no one at all, delivering its images indifferently, indifferent to its own messages (you can easily imagine it still functioning after humanity has disappeared)* (2010: 52, my emphasis).

Whilst the dissimilarities between Twitter and TV are marked, the emphasised part of the passage above is illuminating for the former. The format of Twitter – one-hundred-and-forty character missives that are sent out directionless into the Internet ether – means that the reception of the tweet is insignificant; it is the act of tweeting itself that is important. It is a sophisticated version of shouting from the rooftops and, given the indifference towards the audience, it is not hard to imagine that the last person alive on this earth will idly tweet the banalities of the momentous occasion. Trending – whereby popular tweet topics can be referred to in the tweet using a hash-tag (i.e. ‘#justinbieber’) – means that millions of people can be talking about the same thing at one time. Which is just as well: Bauman, as noted above, has shown that spaces that induce sameness

negate the need for discourse; with Twitter, there can be no discourse, just a series of unilateral statements which sometimes happen to be related.

With both Facebook updates and Twitter tweets we see a design feature that encourages talking-at rather than talking-with, such that the conversational interaction is passive rather than active. Bauman, in a recent interview (Dawes 2011: 131), has described Levinas as his 'ethics teacher' and I think that by returning to the teacher's work on conversation we can cast light on updates/tweets in terms of the student's account of civility. In *Totality and Infinity* (2007) Levinas begins to think through the ethical relation in terms of conversation. As we saw above, Bauman argued that spaces must encourage dialogue – some sort of negotiation – between strangers if civility is to be promoted. Strangely, given his otherwise thorough readings of his 'ethics teacher', this is not developed with reference to Levinas. If we make this connection we can substantiate the claim that dialogue/negotiation is important in environments (including Facebook and Twitter) where we encounter ersatz-friends as strangers.

As was discussed in Chapter Two, Levinas considers speech from an ethical perspective, transposing his account of responsibility into the field of conversation. What is interesting about speech, for Levinas, is that it allows the other person to express herself freely; there can be no control, ultimately, of what comes out of the other person's mouth (Levinas 2007: 51). This means that the other person can be encountered in a way that cannot be reduced to something palatable or predictable; Levinas would say the other cannot be reduced to the same. This is already ethical in that it represents a space in which otherness, of which the Western mindset is so suspicious, can remain intact. Levinas, though, furthers this account by showing that the way in which we respond to the other through speech has an ethical dimension (ibid: 187-193). Speech calls for us to respond to the other person but for Levinas this involves a considerable responsibility. Whatever stage it comes in the conversation, speech is always a response to what the other person has last said. Levinas writes that 'the ethical relationship which subtends discourse is not a species of consciousness whose ray emanates from the I; it puts the I in question. This putting in question emanates from the other' (ibid: 195). In other words, because the response is always to the other person, the individual who responds is always on the back foot in the

conversation and so is forced to respond in ways that do justice to what the other person has said. This draws the individual away from concern for herself and towards concern for the other. The other person comes first and this gesture – of putting the other person first – is of responsibility.

Facebook updates and Twitter tweets do not operate like this. In *Otherwise Than Being* (2008c) Levinas draws a distinction between ‘said’ and ‘saying’ that will illuminate the nature of this difference. The said is a way of dominating the other, an act of speech that does not welcome the other but that is issued regardless of the other. It is analogous to being-alongside-others, a mode entirely devoid of social commerce. Saying, on the other hand, is to respond to the other responsibly (ibid: 5-7); ‘To say is to approach a neighbour’, writes Levinas (ibid: 48). When we chat with our friends on Facebook, through the asynchronous medium of wall posts or through its instant messaging function, then we are obviously involved in a conversation: saying, or talking-with. We do not, however, chat in such a way with all of the people we have ‘friended’ on Facebook. This strange surplus is communicated to only through the medium of the profile update, an address without care for the addressees – that would treat these others the same by telling them any old thing. Likewise, with Twitter, whilst direct messages (known as DMs) will be exchanged by friends, most ‘followers’ will only be communicated with when they read a tweet in their feed that was not meant specifically for them. This talking-at – the said – is merely being-alongside. Or, put another way, instead of approaching a neighbour it is avoiding a stranger.

We see an echo of Levinas’ concern for encountering the other in all her otherness in Bauman’s call to approach the stranger without holding that strangeness against her – and, ultimately, an echo of Levinas’ ethics in Bauman’s account of civility. To converse with the stranger properly (saying not said) is first of all to confront the irreducible strangeness of that other person. This conversation can take unpredictable turns as a result of the gesture of civility that would not force the stranger to comport themselves in set ways. Talking-at (or not talking at all to) strangers is a way of avoiding this unpredictability and is ultimately another method of mismeeting strangers. If Twitter appears to indicate that we are, once more, after the visionary communal phase of web 1.0, desirous to engage with strangers, it is only because it allows the user to remain in

the realm of the said, unilaterally sending one-hundred-and-forty character missives to strangers they do not converse with, which is to say, with whom they do not enter a social space where discourse involves responding with a sense of responsibility (or humility) to the other person.

### 7.2.2. Facebook Stalking

Over a decade ago Paul Virilio observed the following: ‘You will, in fact, understand nothing of the *information revolution* if you are unable to divine that it ushers in, in purely cybernetic fashion, the *revolution of generalized snooping*’ (2005: 62). The ‘Facebook stalking’ phenomenon has proven Virilio to be prescient. Let us be clear about what this refers to: Facebook stalking is not ‘real’ stalking – the threatening harassment of another – by other means; rather, it relates to a set of new practices, made possible by social networking sites, that aim at discovering information about people that would not normally be available given the existing relationship between Facebook stalker and whomever is stalked. Lewis and West (2009: 1215) define it simply as ‘browsing’ the profiles of other users, and their interviews suggest that it is a normal part of Facebook use. So, for example, and dependent on that persons’ privacy settings, we can find out whether someone we meet superficially at a party is single; we can find out in advance about people we do not know who will be attending a function; and we can idly view photographs of friends of friends. These strangers or ersatz-friends, who would otherwise remain unfamiliar, can be snooped upon. As is apparent, there is a danger here – as with ‘Facebook rape’, where a user’s account is hijacked by someone else, usually a friend who makes embarrassing status updates and wall posts on the user’s behalf – of a looseness of language that detracts from the seriousness of the real offence. Nevertheless, these are enduring terms and, as we shall see presently, the association with stalking is useful.

Whilst Bauman (2008c: 93) has noted the fear of stalking, suggesting that stalkers act as modern day bogeymen, it is not clear in his work that this is sufficiently explained by his subsequent discussions of strangers. We need to motivate a leap from fear of strangers to fear of stalking, and Žižek begins to point us in the right direction. For Žižek, fear of others is ‘a basic constituent of today’s subjectivity’ (2008: 34). What

produces that fear is the way that the other person is experienced as somehow holding something back, her being, in a way, not wholly explicable or understandable from the perspective of the individual who encounters her. This is what Žižek calls ‘the toxic dimension’ of the other person: ‘the subject *as such* is toxic in its very form, in its abyss of Otherness’ (Žižek 2009a: 46). This fear is manifest in the idea of the stalker as contemporary society’s bogeyman. Žižek argues that ‘[t]oday’s liberal tolerance towards others, the respect of otherness and openness towards it, is counterpointed by an obsessive fear of harassment’ (2008: 35) and observes that ‘in today’s ideological space, very real forms of harassment such as rape are intertwined with the narcissistic notion of the individual who experiences the close proximity of others as an intrusion into his or her private space’ (2010: 5). Our reaction to over-proximity, then, is at the heart of the matter; our biggest fear is that the fundamentally aloof other will come unbearably close, and this, just as a fear of lightning storms might lead to the postulation of a vengeful god, leads to the stalker becoming fear reified. Our aversion to over-proximity has two consequences, the first of which is that we can only tolerate others if they keep their distance:

Tolerance means: no harassment. Harassment is a key word. Fundamentally, what this says is: hide your desire; don’t come too close to me. [...] That shows us that tolerance in this context is precisely a form of intolerance: intolerance for the closeness of the other (Žižek in Badiou & Žižek 2009: 92-93).

The second consequence is that we are ourselves duty-bound to keep our distance from others: ‘My duty to be tolerant towards the other effectively means that I should not get too close to him, intrude on his space’ (Žižek 2008: 35). Žižek illustrates this in typical style: ‘It means, as I have experienced in the US: If you look too long at somebody, a woman or whoever – that is already a visual harassment; if you say something dirty – that is already verbal rape’ (in Badiou & Žižek 2009: 93). As a result of this two-way street of over-proximity concern, there has been ‘an explosion of legal and moral rules’ designed ‘to prevent individuals from encroaching upon one another (annoying or “harassing” one another)’ (Žižek 2010: 38-39).

Facebook stalking should be considered as part of this problem of the fear of over-proximity. Stalking is not an experience common to the majority of people, even if the



fear of stalkers is. Facebook stalking, though, can draw us all in. Now we are the stalkers, compelled to a virtual over-proximity. This is fully compatible with Žižek's position. We have become aware that we must keep our distance, not encroach upon others; Facebook stalking allows us to satisfy the voyeuristic urge whilst adhering to these legal and moral rules surrounding over-proximity. We can, as such, fulfil our duty and transgress the idea behind it at the same time, 'enjoying' the other person (looking at their photographs, reading their wall) without their awareness and without getting too close – without getting close at all. Žižek can look all he wants at women without being accused of visual harassment so long as he signs up to Facebook, which does indeed appear to be, as Lewis and West suggest it might, primarily 'a form of entertainment' (2009: 1225).

Finally, this speaks also of the civility of social networking. Facebook stalking allows the stalker to get virtually close to strangers without the risky business of meeting them face-to-face. It is then possible to snoop on this person without having to encounter her unpredictable actions or utterances – or, simply, desires. Although the stranger now has the attention of the stalker, it is a superficial attention and there is no meaningful meeting, since the experience is entirely one-directional. Facebook stalking allows us to unravel some of the mystery of the stranger, so that we might put ourselves at ease, without any social encounter or *quid pro quo*. It is possible, even, for a user to stalk all those who would be attending the same forthcoming event, if that event is organised through Facebook, meaning that the space in which the event takes place is denuded in advance of all its strangeness.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Whilst friendship is probably core to social media, something like Facebook encourages the user to create a network larger than a friendship group, incorporating strangers or ersatz-friends into a social hotpot. Social media are inherently emic spaces; the (exaggerated) old web 1.0 ethos of open spaces or forums for strangers to meet strangers has largely given way to personalised spaces in which the user has control over who is allowed to share it. Whilst ever-expanding friend lists sprawling into the

hundreds suggest that there is a limited openness to the ersatz-friend, the ease of de-friending – of deleting that ersatz-friend from one’s friend list – further gives credence to the idea that these are environments in which emic strategies are readily available to the individual. Bauman would suggest that they are too readily available, at the expense of the art of civility, but I am content simply to observe how this incivility is fundamental to the architecture of such sites. The same applies to the phagic functioning of codes of conducts and profiles, where behaviours are normalised and so too the presentation of the users of the sites. Friends and strangers can cohabit in the same environment as the user, since they are all formally similar. The presence of ersatz-friends within one’s personalised space requires of users that they adopt active and passive modes of interaction – both of which are catered to by the functions designed into the environment. Friends are afforded the kinds of meaningful and bilateral communication allowed for by wall posts, comments, private messages and instant chat. The ersatz-friends are more likely to be recipients of unilateral forms of interaction, the two focused on above being status updates/tweets and so-called stalking. With the former, the ersatz-friend is privy only to indifferent messages, indifference being derived both from the non-directional nature of its transmission and the indifference of the message to its audience. With the latter, the profile of the ersatz-friend can be perused without their knowledge, the strangeness of encounters unravelled without the unpleasant business of a mutually inclusive encounter, such that interaction is eschewed for voyeurism.

This is, of course, only an initial sketch and further empirical sociological research – into forms of interaction with various kinds of ‘friends’ or the content of communications through social media, say – is necessary to complete the picture. This is not something that can be explored in the present work; rather, in Chapter Nine, I will further develop the emerging account of the repulsion of proximity, begun in Chapter Six. What is required is that online environments are not treated as some sort of ‘other space’ but simply as social spaces that are shaped as much by their design and normative regulation as are urban spaces. In order to examine the impact of the online architecture of social media it was necessary to go beyond Levinas, since within his work we would not find the adequate resources, although, again, in Chapter Nine we will return the ethical encounter to this online environment in order to draw conclusions

about the repulsion of proximity and moral spasticity in new media ‘spaces’. Before this, though, it is necessary to consider not only the inert design features of this environment but also the lively softwares that permeate it – and their role in the co-opting of social media for the ends of consumer capitalism.

## 8. SURVEILLANCE THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKING

Information is a key part of social networking. In our day-to-day exchanges we are uploading and sharing valuable quantities of information, making possible unprecedented levels of surveillance. David Lyon (1994) notes that surveillance in this context is about the storing and processing of personal information. This definition places a desirable emphasis on information storage, highlighting that surveillance is not just about how information is used but also the amassing of it in the first place. With this in mind, Gary T. Marx's (2002) characterisation of the 'new surveillance' as the use of technologies to extract personal data adds a pertinent dimension; surveillance is not merely 'snooping' but any technological means of extracting exploitable information from users. This, I suggest, is just as applicable to social networking as it is to more cloak-and-dagger methods. With the rise of social media, surveillance hides in the open. We are seduced into giving up the information in the name of social commerce, creating what Mark Andrejevic (2007) calls a digital enclosure from which information can be extracted for corporate gain. On top of this, many of the surveillance technologies used in this context, such as 'social ad' generating programs, operate algorithmically, processing information according to set parameters with minimal human input. A significant change in surveillance today can be detected, as visual modes are replaced with algorithmic software.

What I want to resist is an attempt to understand this through the work of Michel Foucault, so often the first port of call in theoretical approaches to surveillance. First, the work of Foucault with regards surveillance would give us a political reading where I would like to draw out moral problems; and, second, my intention here is to consider the challenge to ethical theory posed by non-human actors. On this latter point, recall my remarks on Levinas' humanist ethics in Chapter Two: Levinas does not recognise the liveliness of objects and so there is no place in his account of ethics for a consideration of the moral problems posed by sharing one's environment with so-called 'thinking things' (Beer 2007). Foucault's panoptic emphasis on the visual would be ill-suited for considering algorithmic forms of surveillance, these spritely and smart modes of extracting information. For these reasons I turn instead to the work of Jean-François Lyotard in *The Inhuman* (2004c), since this is not only concerned with an information-

hungry computerised capitalism, but is also a consideration of the impact on humanity that living within this system wreaks. Lyotard highlights the complicity of new technologies with capitalist extension whilst raising urgent moral problems surrounding the impact of this dynamic and the inhuman functioning of new technologies (their difference and indifference to the human). This will provide a framework for a critique of surveillance through social networking focused on its impact upon what it means to be human. I will argue that such surveillance is inhuman, serving to extend the capitalist system according to a dangerous logic – performative, heterophobic – whilst making the user complicit in the whole shoddy process. Within the present chapter I am content to draw out moral problems; in the next chapter I will return to this work in order to explore how the ethical theorist might respond.

### **8.1. Lyotard and the Inhuman**

First published in 1979, Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* has been his most famous and most commented-upon text, a work that has been taken up by sociologists, philosophers and literary theorists, amongst others. However, this popular focus has as its consequence the neglect of another key text, *The Inhuman*, published nine years later. This text is largely philosophical in nature and has yet to have the same impact in the social sciences as its more heralded predecessor. In this section I will introduce Lyotard's work in *The Inhuman* in order to show its usefulness for understanding surveillance in our new media society.

However, *The Postmodern Condition* remains an important text and, before proceeding, I will highlight two elements of it that both illuminate a reading of *The Inhuman* and augment an approach to surveillance. First, Lyotard introduces 'performativity' as the operating principle of what he calls 'techno-scientific capitalism' (the combined force of technological and scientific R&D and advanced capitalism). Performativity is the optimisation of the relationship between input and output (Lyotard 2005: 11). That is, the system works to constantly optimise its performance and the only legitimation for the power that it possesses is its very efficiency (ibid: xxiv). The decision-makers – states but, increasingly, corporate leaders – apply 'input/output matrices' to all elements

of their purview and, also, to ‘us’ allocating ‘our lives for the growth of power’ and introducing a level of terror to the performance: ‘be operational [...] or disappear’ (ibid). This operation is nothing to do with justice or truth – or any of the key tenets of humanist progress – but is purely technological:

[Technologies] follow a principle, and it is the principle of optimal performance: maximising output (the information or modifications obtained) and minimizing input (the energy expended in the process). Technology is therefore a game pertaining not to the true, the just, the beautiful, etc., but to efficiency: a technical ‘move’ is ‘good’ when it does better and/or expends less energy than another (ibid: 44).

Everything must be translated into quantities of information, which are easily communicable, in order to gain optimal performance through efficiency. Anything that cannot be translated is abandoned (ibid: 4). This leads to ‘the hegemony of computers’ (ibid), the rule of performative logic, and the dominance of a computerised form of capitalism. Here Lyotard identifies complicity between new technologies and the capitalist system, both sharing the same logic and the former allowing for the optimised performance of the latter. Deeply wary of this, his second useful move is to pose the question: ‘who will know?’ (ibid: 6). That is, who can acquire the information? Who decides what of this proliferating information is true? Who gets to make the decisions based on this information? Who even knows the decision to be made? ‘Increasingly, the central question is becoming who will have access to the information these machines must have in storage to guarantee that the right decisions are made’ (ibid: 14).

The turn to *The Inhuman* is motivated by the more sustained attention Lyotard gives to these two elements and by the more critical reading Lyotard offers, and I will utilise the notion of inhumanity expounded here to identify moral problems with contemporary forms of surveillance. The book is a collection of commissioned lectures given by Lyotard that all seek, in different ways, to approach two questions: ‘what if human beings, in humanism’s sense, were in the process of, constrained into, becoming inhuman (that’s the first part)? And (the second part), what if what is “proper” to humankind were to be inhabited by the inhuman?’ (Lyotard 2004c: 2). This notion of the inhuman is taken in two separate senses:

- 1) the inhumanity of the system (the techno-scientific development that results in the ascendancy of computerised capitalism);
- 2) the inhumanity that ‘haunts the human from the inside’ (Gane 2003: 439), taking the soul hostage, as Lyotard puts it (2004c: 2).

The second kind of inhumanity – hostage-taking – is somewhat opaque but I find Stuart Sim’s reading here to be instructive, in part: ‘the inhumanity of our social conditioning: the pressure to conform to prescribed modes of behaviour’ (Sim 1996: 130). However, as we will see, this does not quite cover the range of inhumanity of the second kind found in Lyotard’s text; it indicates, not only social conditioning but also the usurpation of properly human roles – the replacement of the human by the machine.

#### *8.1.1. Development through Translation*

In *The Inhuman*, Lyotard redeploys his concept of performativity, now framed in terms of ‘saving time,’ in order to examine the nature of ‘development’: the utilisation of technological and scientific advances for the extension of computerised capitalism. He observes: “‘Development’ is the ideology of the present time’ and the saving of time is its modus operandi’ (2004c: 3). Since it operates solely by this performative principle, development has no goal other than its own furtherance. The main way of achieving this, according to Lyotard, is through an incessant and all-encompassing digitalisation. What we see today is the rewriting of everything as bits or units of information. This is the main effect of our technological environment (rather than the proliferation of simulacra *pace* Baudrillard). These bits of information conform to the chief principle of development: performativity. Lyotard writes: ‘Any piece of data becomes useful (exploitable, operational) once it can be translated into information’ (ibid: 50); it is easily read, quickly transmitted. Further: ‘The availability of information is becoming the only criterion of social importance’ (ibid: 105). That is, the hegemony of computers places demands on the individual to make available personal information in digital form such that it is operational (computer-readable).

The increasing computerisation of all aspects of society is directly linked to new potentials for all-encompassing surveillance. With the demand for everything to become

translated into information comes the storage of vast amounts of personal data and an indelible electronic trail. These can be of immense value to corporations, for example, the detailed amount of personal information that is utilised in a credit check. Lyotard draws attention to the connections between a demand for development through increased efficiency, digitalisation and the extension of the capitalist system through the exploitation of this ‘digital enclosure’ (Andrejevic 2007). Development (as ideology) is inextricable from capitalist extension; information is big business – and surveillance essential to it.

### 8.1.2. *Dominance*

Our information society, observes Lyotard, heralds the dominance of computerised capitalism. Four points in this regard can be identified. First, the computerisation of society, with its demand that everything be translated into information, creates the conditions for this dominance. Information can be frictionlessly exchanged which means that once anything is translated it becomes easily commodified. The possibility of resistance is foreclosed, as any sort of counterculture or subversion can be translated and so becomes ‘commercializable’ (Lyotard 2004c: 76) – and, thereby, consumed by the system. Lyotard remarks: ‘The question of a hegemonic teleculture on a world scale is already posed’ (ibid: 50). Second, there is the question of legitimacy. Who is responsible for this translation into information and who takes responsibility for it? Usually the state would be held responsible, but now the challenge to state power by corporations that Lyotard remarked upon in *The Postmodern Condition* has been completed, such that telegraphic breaching now goes well beyond state control. This means that multi-national corporations are manipulating what is stored and what is considered ‘good’ information. By extension, they are then also deciding what is irrelevant, what is not operative and so what should not be inscribed in memory. That which cannot be translated or that is not efficient (i.e. dissenting or inoperative narratives, cultures, data resources, etc.), is forgotten, as ‘those parts of the human race which appear superfluous’ for the goal of continued development are ‘abandoned’ (Lyotard 2004c: 77). So we see that the question of legitimacy (or the lack thereof) is intimately related to the question of transparency (who bears witness to the process when the perpetrators are not accountable in the way politicians would have been) and



ultimately betrays Lyotard's concern that the system is intolerant of difference. Finally, this whole process of development is inhuman; humans are more its vehicle than its beneficiary. There is no 'progress' here, only a process of complexification (the growth of the complexity of the system, or negentropy). As Lyotard puts it elsewhere: 'It is no longer possible to call development progress. It seems to proceed of its own accord, with a force, an autonomous motoricity that is independent of ourselves. It does not answer to demands issuing from man's needs' (1992: 91-92). Development is an end in itself, striving only to achieve higher performance/efficiency and greater profits. 'It is reproduced by accelerating and extending itself according to its internal dynamic alone' (Lyotard 2004c: 7).

Lyotard's reflections on the dominance of computerised capitalism draw attention to the increasing role of corporations in surveillance, and the complicity of surveillance technologies with the capitalist order. Through the surveillance of electronic trails (websites visited, purchases made, etc.) it becomes possible to directly market goods and services, whilst the collection of geodemographic data makes it possible to prioritise premium customers (see, for example, Burrows & Gane 2006; Lyon 2003; Solove 2004). By removing friction (the inefficiency of acting without such information), both approaches result in faster capitalism. The opacity of this practice is alarming: who can be held to account? And how is the algorithmic software that processes personal information, making possible such marketing and prioritising, written? (That is, *who will know?*) What makes this inhuman is that, unlike surveillance by the state – where the justification is some form of human good (civil order, the reduction of crime, etc.) – the only goal of this corporate surveillance is increased performativity and therefore the extension of the system of computerised capitalism.

### *8.1.3. Hostage-Taking*

The translating impact and dominance of computerised capitalism demonstrates inhumanity in the first sense: the internally inhuman functioning of the system, the translation of everything into information and the dominance of computerised capitalism, along with its intolerance for difference and its development with disregard for human needs. Our final reading of Lyotard will indicate an example of inhumanity

in the second sense, (both) social conditioning (our actions taken hostage) and the usurpation of roles (that which is proper to the human taken hostage), illustrating the way that we become forced to think like computers or replaced by computers, human (reflexive) thought replaced with computer (determinant) thought.

With information ‘there’s no longer any question of free forms given here and now to sensibility and the imagination’ – just bits (Lyotard 2004c: 34). That is, there is nothing to think through, just data to process. Lyotard is here concerned with what is lost when we move from a human to a computer mode of thinking. Human thought does not operate in binary code. It does not work solely with bits, with processed units of information. Rather, human thought takes in the full picture; it is focused, like the computer processor, but lateral too, taking in side effects and marginal data. Human thought can sift through data quickly, discovering what is useful and what is not without the need to run a series of trial and error tests. Most importantly, it is ‘a mode of thought not guided by rules for determining data, but showing itself as possibly capable of developing such rules afterwards on the basis of results obtained ‘reflexively’ (ibid: 15). This is what Immanuel Kant called reflective judgement, which stands in contrast to determinant judgement wherein rules are pre-given. Kantian reflexive judgement is described by Lyotard elsewhere as ‘the synthesis we are able to make of random data without the help of preestablished rules of linkage’ (1988: 8) whilst the way of thinking that techno-science would impose – ‘programming, forecasting, efficiency, security, computing, and the like’ – is ‘the triumph of determinant judgement’ (ibid: 21). Computers cannot defy rules or create their own: they simply follow them, lacking creativity.

Lyotard’s reflections on the disparity between human and computer thinking contain two warnings. First, that as the demand to work with information increases we become more like the machines with which we work. We begin to think as computers – in terms of efficiency, processing, etc. – losing what is valuable about the human mode of thought. Human thought is reduced ‘to the immediate *processing* of information, and to the selection of pre-programmed, and thus standardised, options from the framework of the system’ (Gane 2003: 441). This is inhuman in Sim’s sense, as the demand to operate in a new media age puts pressure on us to conform to computerised (and capitalist)

ways of thinking. Second, that the human is in danger of being replaced by the computer (in the work place, say) and so creative human thought is replaced by limited computer thought. This is inhuman in the sense of the usurpation of human roles. Lyotard demands that we consider the way that technologies are today replacing us in many activities and the way that their inhuman mode of thinking is inadequate and dangerous.

My focus in the next section is on the use of algorithmic surveillance software in the social networking context. I also want to consider these alongside some developments in surveillance of urban spaces in order to cast light on the potential of surveillance of social networks; this is valuable since the latter is an emerging phenomenon – both in terms of its use and of research into its use. These ‘smart’ surveillance technologies prevalent today can combine not only data-collection, but also decision-making – not only about what information is relevant but, increasingly, what actions human or non-human actors should take in response to it. Lyotard’s account of the paucity of computer thought when compared to human thought in particular, and his account of the inhuman in general, will be utilised after considerations of these surveillance practices in order to explore what moral problems they might assist us in articulating. Two points must be made in this regard: first, I do not wish to impose the theory onto the empirical in order to derive these moral problems, rather, to begin with the empirical and ask where Lyotard’s theoretical contribution might be useful in revealing moral problems; second, the ‘computer thought’ considered here is algorithmic – strictly guided by the commands written into it – and so Lyotard’s work with regards its paucity is considered to be appropriate. This is not to suggest that it could be applied uniformly to all thinking things since they may possess a greater sophistication and, it has been argued by some commentators, may yet be able to evolve beyond their traditional limitations and into creative thinking (see Hayles 2005; and, on the evolution of non-organic life, De Landa 2003: 6). I am interested here only in the specific context of social networking and the capability of the ‘non-human actors’ in that context now; things may, of course, change – and perhaps different moral problems would then arise.

## 8.2. Algorithmic Surveillance

The account of Lyotard's notion of the inhuman above provides a useful tool for critically examining the moral dimensions of new media. First, the inhumanity of the system shows that online environments are not neutral spaces like a park or a pub. Something like a social networking site is a human environment that is shaped by the marriage of technology – specifically information technology – and a capitalist system that aims chiefly for its own expansion, a development not guided by human goals but purely by self-perpetuation. Given that interaction online can only be informational, this is a far more acute problem than in offline environments; information as an emergent commodity form is *the* unit with which the system operates. This means that we need to analyse how informational interaction is exploited and the impacts this may have. Second, the inhumanity of usurpation shows us that within an ethical event there are actors that are not human. That is to say, particular moral problems not only contain non-human agents but that some such problems exist *because* of the involvement of non-human agents and the logic by which they operate. Finally, the inhumanity of social conditioning shows that behaviours are shaped to benefit the expansion of the system. This means that the architecture of an online environment must be scrutinised in order to ascertain how they mediate and control online interaction. In short, what unites these forms of inhumanity is the following observation: We have to factor in the online environment *itself* when considering the ethics of new media.

In what follows I will put to work these notions of the inhuman in the specific area of algorithmic surveillance, using examples to pick out resultant moral problems. This is, as such, an exercise of bearing witness to the inhuman within the new media environment.

### 8.2.1. *The Inhumanity of the System I*

Scott Lash (2007) has observed that power operates through the algorithm. As social life becomes 'mediatized' (ibid: 70) so does power extend into the everyday, through software: 'A society of ubiquitous media means a society in which power is increasingly in the algorithm' (ibid: 71). This means that the algorithmic software

through which surveillance can be achieved is an important site of inquiry. Beer (2009) has shown how Lash's (Lyotardian) notion of power ought to be applied to 'participatory web cultures' (or, web 2.0), and so my focus below is on surveillance through social networking sites. Lyotard has highlighted the complicity of technological development with capitalist extension. The potential of web cultures to be incorporated into capitalist culture was slow to be seen, with the early Internet (web 1.0) being a site of what Felicia Wu Song (2009: 136) calls 'visionary communal' groups where strangers met with strangers to form online communities. Needless to say, this curious disconnection of technological development and capitalist extension was bridged and, in what follows, I will frame this history and the present practice of surveillance of social networking profiles for commercial ends as part of what Lyotard calls the inhumanity of the system. This includes three key observations: the opacity of the algorithmic functioning of this surveillance; the transformation of web cultures into capitalist cultures; and the system's disregard for difference.

The Internet was not always a site of economic interests, early groups such as the WELL being formed with countercultural, communal ideals in mind (Wu Song 2009: 82; see also Rheingold 1993). But with the mid-90s boom came online advertising: first, hypertext links that allowed users to navigate to advertising pages; these were largely ineffective since relatively few users 'clicked-through' so, second, banner adverts became the norm, with the advert situated on the page that the user was already accessing; third, more imposing forms then came to be used, such as pop-up adverts and flash banners; these were largely seen to be too aggressive and so, finally, what we now most commonly encounter are text adverts, small and situated to the side/s of web pages, such as those we see when we perform a Google search (ibid: 84-85). However, advertising is only half the story. When the bubble burst in the early-00s, ushering in the end of web 1.0, media companies began a period of acquisitions, such that previously non-commercial sites – sites that were fundamentally communal, despite their reliance on selling 'space' for advertising – became part of media stables (such as when the WELL was acquired by the online media company Salon.com in 1999) (ibid: 82-83). It was only so long before corporations realised the value of the very form these sites took.

Take, for example, the Facebook profile: we saw in the previous chapter that the information collected here – name, age/date of birth, location, hobbies and interests, musical tastes, and so on – was encouraged such that the user could engage profitably with Facebook; it also allows Facebook to engage profitably with users. Users input this information to present an identity to others; at the same time this is highly valuable information. Wu Song notes that ‘personal data become a form of currency in online participation’ (ibid: 88) – a form, I would add, of cultural currency that becomes a valuable commodity to corporations. The information contained in these profiles can be collected and analysed to look for preferences and patterns of behaviours amongst the social network, allowing for precision targeting, an efficient mode of advertising, in tune with the Lyotardian principle of performativity. Anecdotally, I remember clearly being surprised when adverts for B. B. King tickets and Stevie Ray Vaughan t-shirts regularly appeared on my Facebook page: *how did they know?* There is here an asymmetric visibility of the datasets being held; Facebook, in terms familiar to Nigel Thrift’s *Knowing Capitalism* (2005), knew more about me than I knew about it (see also Gane & Beer 2008: 99-100). As Wu Song observes: ‘Although the rhetoric and discourse of most online communities never even hint at the ubiquitous data collection and surveillance that normally occur, such activities are buried in the fine print of the Terms of Service and Privacy Policy that most members never bother to read’ (ibid: 89). Facebook’s privacy statement reads:

We allow advertisers to choose the characteristics of users who will see their advertisements and we may use any of the non-personally identifiable attributes we have collected (including information you may have decided not to show to other users, such as your birth year or other sensitive personal information or preferences) to select the appropriate audience for those advertisements (Facebook Privacy Policy 2010).

Along with this personalised advertising, Facebook also collects site activity information and information on the kind of device used to access Facebook (including browser type, IP address, location and the sites the user visits) (Facebook Privacy Policy 2010). When shared with third parties, such information can be used for precision targeting of markets and consumers.

What is unclear, however, is how the information is processed. The controversy over Facebook Beacon, the advertising system that ran from its inception in 2007 to its

deactivation in 2009, is illustrative (see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook\\_Beacon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Facebook_Beacon)). This system used data from other websites – for example, online transactions – in order to target advertising on Facebook. Users complained that the process was opaque, and confusion about what data was being collected – which online actions tracked – was widespread. Whilst Beacon was shut-down, this obfuscation continues: nowhere in Facebook’s literature is it clearly stated quite how their data-mining and surveillance works. The question Lyotard asks in *The Postmodern Condition* is posed once more: who will know? The power is in the algorithmic functioning of data-processing software, and yet its functioning is unknown to the users of social networking sites. Who writes the software? What commands does it follow? How does it target data? And what does it collect? Whereas Friedrich Kittler (1997) worried that we mistake our understanding of software for an understanding of the operating system – not to mention of the hardware – of computers, with these surveillance algorithms we are not even aware of the functioning of the software, beyond its surface effects (for example, the generation of tailored adverts).

Whilst Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* prompts us to explore the hidden power of such technologies, and already warns of the commodification of (personal) information, it is his *The Inhuman* that can take us further in examining the impact of the logic that motivates it. Lyotard argues here that as cultures and subcultures begin to operate through telecommunications technology they run the risk of being consumed by capitalist culture. Their key elements – memory (taking in and storing knowledge) and recall (regulating access to knowledge) – are digitalised, causing cultures to become spatio-temporally ‘unanchored’, therefore easily transmissible and ‘exploitable’ (Lyotard 2004c: 49-50). Cultures and subcultures begin to have a market value; once translated into information they can be packaged and sold. For Lyotard, nothing can escape this process as even the most subversive of countercultures can be marketed and so become profitable. What is so surprising in hindsight about the early stages of the Internet is that, despite being comprised of digital ‘webcultures’ and communities, commercialisation was slow to come. What we see with participatory webcultures such as Facebook is the way that they are increasingly being exploited for profit. The various diffuse subcultures and communities that exist within the Facebook framework have

been colonised by the ‘hegemonic teleculture’ (ibid: 50) of computerised capitalism, the only real game in town.

This observation also highlights a moral problem. When virtual communities become commercialised, different communities become different markets. This has two effects. First, as Wu Song (2009: 95) notes, when minority groups come to be seen as niche markets, the inequalities between groups are masked; all that is relevant is what data can be gathered about what they consume so that goods and services can be marketed accordingly. Instead of seeing unequally advantaged citizens, this process sees dissimilarly consuming customers. Lyotard, when he wrote *The Inhuman*, feared that such groups would be abandoned by the system unless they became performative (2004c: 76-77). What we see today is that such groups are tolerated because, through data-mining, their inequality can be exploited for profit – which is to say, they have become performative. The effect is a systemic quietism towards social inequality, since it represents another space into which the system can extend. Second, as different cultural groups are exploited for profit ‘their members are homogeneously approached as consumers’ (Wu Song 2009: 95). Instead of respecting the differences of cultural groups, this process sees only the cult of consumption. For example, one’s identity as a lesbian or black man is re-defined as one’s identity as a consumer who buys the kinds of things bought by black men or lesbians. Later moving away from those remarks in *The Inhuman* about the abandonment of minority groups, Lyotard writes: ‘If you are a woman, and Irish, and still presentable, and some kind of professor in Brazil, and a lesbian, and writing non-academic books, then you are a real good little stream. Cultural capital is interested in you. You are a little walking cultural market’ (2003: 6). Difference is reduced to different streams of ‘cultural capital’ and there follows the exploitation of a ‘marketplace of singularities’ (ibid: 7); whereas at one point – Lyotard does not say when but it must be around the time of his writing *The Inhuman* – minorities and multiculturalism had no place in the system, now they have become profitable (ibid: 11). Here we see the disregard of the system for difference: it is only tolerated to the extent that it can be used to market diverse goods and services – in effect subsuming it under the overriding sameness of consumption. As Christian Fuchs (2012: 54) notes, users are sold as a commodity to advertisers, fine-grained identity distinctions lost in the conformity of commodity.



### 8.2.2. *The Inhumanity of the System II*

Could we say, though, that – the above moral problems and the nagging question of how the software works notwithstanding – we freely submit to this surveillance and, moreover, *benefit* from it? Insidious new surveillance technologies are more obviously invidious. Take, for example, the RFID (radio frequency identification) tag. RFIDs have entered the academic imaginary in recent years (see for example: Beer 2007, 2009; Gane & Beer 2008: 62-64; Gane *et al.* 2007; Mitchell 2005). These tags are implanted in consumer goods to allow objects and consumers to be tracked through time/space; they can be ‘pinged’ much like a barcode, but from a distance. With RFIDs there are ‘unprecedented capacities for surveillance and control, for RFID technologies now allow physical objects and bodies to be positioned and tracked through the Internet’ (Gane & Beer 2008: 63); ‘RFIDs are the dream of the capitalist marketplace, being able to identify and track consumers’ (Gane *et al.* 2007: 331) – track, that is, the *right* consumers. These tags allow goods and services to be targeted at specific groups of consumers in a faster, more efficient way, creating a smoother, frictionless system. With RFIDs those who are being tracked are often unaware, but we increasingly see examples where something similar is a consumer ‘choice’. Many applications on Apple’s iPhone give users the choice to have their position located by GPS. This allows the application to present to the user nearby retail/leisure facilities, for example (as is the case with Wetherspoon’s Pub Finder application). Whereas with RFIDs the mobility of objects is traced, GPS location through mobile telephony allows for the mobility of people to be documented.

What about Facebook? We have already looked at ‘social ad’ generation so let us consider a different feature here: Facebook Places, which ran from 2010 to 2011, allowed for the voluntary ‘checking-in’ via a mobile Internet device of a user’s location (see Facebook 2011b). The user could also ‘tag’ the friends they were with at this location. Once a user had checked in, they could find if any of their Facebook friends are also checked in at that location, whilst all of their friends can see where they are. Here we see Facebook as a tool for face-to-face meet ups as well as a form of benign voyeurism (we can see where our friends are – and therefore, to some degree, what they are up to – without the intention of meeting them there). However, this feature also

incentivised checking-in with the offer of discounts at shops and restaurants in that location whilst encouraging the user to advertise this to her Facebook friends: ‘Check in to claim a deal and let friends know about it’ (ibid). Three things are happening here: the user is being seduced into giving up information about their movements; this information is used to increase the performativity of the system; and the user’s social relationships are used to further this. One particular kind of deal, the ‘friend deal’, perfected this by requiring the user to tag their friends so that they could receive discounts as a group. The Facebook webpage about Places equates it with traditional loyalty cards, suggesting it is merely a digital version of something that already existed – but the old loyalty card was never part of a system in which the holder tagged their locations. The digitised version exists in a culture of comprehensive location tagging (not just the location in which a discount might be offered) and so there is an unprecedented collection of migratory data. Is this tracking a nightmarish surveillance or the offer of a convenience culture?

Liotard shows us that this dichotomy is a false one. That is, convenience in a system of computerised capitalism comes with surveillance as its price. For mechanisms of consumption to be sped-up the means of exchange needs to be sped-up – and this means digitalised. More than this, though, the surveillance/convenience binary can be restated as an opposition between control and freedom; yet freedom here is only freedom to consume more efficiently, to move through frictionless channels. The choice of freedom/convenience is a *choiceless choice* as we would merely be choosing to operate according to the performative logic of the system. *Choiceless* because this performativity is the very demand of the system: be operative or be obsolete (Liotard 2005: xxiv). The danger is that those groups of people that do nothing to enhance and extend the development of the system (by making *themselves* convenient – trackable) are abandoned (Liotard 2004c: 77). The façade of ‘convenience’ merely indicates what Liotard calls ‘Mr Nice Guy totalitarianism’ (1993: 159).

### 8.2.3. *The Inhumanity of Usurpation*

As well as surveillance of the ‘dead’ information we post on Facebook and of the ‘lively’ traces we make spatio-temporally through geo-tagging, the posting of video

content opens up a space for algorithmic surveillance of the visual. In order to understand the ramifications of this it is first necessary to explore how this works in the urban environment before redirecting our attention back to the online.

In our contemporary ‘surveillance society’, we are under the impression that our every move is being watched, with ubiquitous CCTV cameras supposed markers of this. Yet it is more common that we are watched only retrospectively, if something happens that requires it. Being recorded by CCTV is not the same thing as being watched. Often nothing happens to the data recorded other than it being stored for possible later access – if, for example, we are the victims of crime or commit a crime. (The key reading on CCTV remains Clive Norris and Gary Armstrong’s 1999 work, *The Maximum Surveillance Society: The Rise of CCTV*; see also Norris 2003.) However, new ‘intelligent’ CCTV cameras change this situation. Although we are still not being watched, something is happening to the data that is collected: it is processed algorithmically by software. These technologies are leading us towards the ‘automation of street surveillance’ (Graham 2005: 572), wherein human input to the process, after the writing of the software, is marginalised.

Event-driven CCTV is an example of the inhumanity of usurpation. Such technologies are programmed to recognise ‘apparently abnormal behaviours, presences, and people’, for example ‘the signature walking styles that are deemed to be most often used by those committing criminal acts’ (ibid: 572). They work by having first been programmed to recognise deviation from normal (i.e. expected) behaviours. This human input – which also raises the Lyotardian problem of who knows/decides what is expected/normal – then retreats, with software left to do the ‘thinking’. As Stephen Graham reports, a foot moving backwards and forwards is interpreted as a kick, a rapid arm movement as a violent act (ibid: 573). What we see is the migration of thinking from the human to technology. But will the software be able to tell the difference between a peaceful protest and a riot? Or a *parkour* runner and a burglar? Or street theatre and a street brawl? The problem here is the rigidity of the algorithmic mode of processing data compared with the human’s ability to ascertain the contextual difference between what can be exactly similar movements.

The importance of this technology should not be underestimated when considering surveillance through new media. With all the video content uploaded to social media sites – Facebook, YouTube, etc. – the application of such behaviour-recognition software cannot be ruled out. Recent student protests against tuition fees in the UK gained a considerable amount of media coverage in 2010 and 2011. With some of these protests escalating into acts of vandalism or violence there was – probably still is – a perceived need to identify agitators. How might a seemingly innocuous video of one of the protests posted online by a student be processed? Might one student be loitering at the edge of the frame with a suspicious gait? It is presently unclear whether such techniques have been used in this context, but the potential is very real. Consider ‘Recognizr’ facial recognition technology; Sandoval (2012: 162) observes that ‘Recognizr’, developed by The Astonishing Tribe and designed to cross-reference social networking sites with photographs taken on camera phones in order to recognise the face of the photographed individual, could be used for precision-targeted marketing by finding out an individual’s buying practices through using an image of their face to locate their social networking profile. This, as Lyotard would observe, would make for a more efficient capitalist system but, in relation to usurpation, it is possible to imagine further applications. An individual’s associations could be easily traced through such software, facial recognition applied to group photos posted online and offering an ambiguous account of with whom she has met. ‘Ambiguous’ because being in a photograph with someone says nothing more than that they have met; and yet dangerous because of the guilt by association – with, say, known terrorists or exuberant protestors. If nothing else, the use of facial recognition technology in mobile photography suggests that behaviour-recognition through online videos on social networking sites is not too far-fetched. Indeed, the Metropolitan Police’s decision to purchase Geotime software, which can map the online activities of ‘suspects’, including social networking and content-posting, has already led to fears of abuse in cases of lawful protest (see Gallagher & Syal 2011). Geotime tracks the suspect’s ‘movements’ online (i.e. site use), highlights her associations with others online, and presents this to the user as a three-dimensional visual; event driven CCTV and Recognizr suggest that the content of these online activities and associations could be subjected to further algorithmic analysis.

We see with this computerised surveillance the inhuman with which Lyotard was so concerned. When surveillance is achieved through algorithmic processing it can be identified as inhuman in the sense of usurpation in four ways. First, a role that would ordinarily belong to the human comes to be technological. The decision-making power of these software algorithms challenges human agency (Beer 2009: 987). Humans are taken out of the decision-making process when analysing surveillance data, taking human thought with them; the more performative computer software takes our place and decision-making becomes a question of processing information according to set instructions. Second, this mode of technological ‘thinking’ is impoverished in comparison with human thinking. Sim (2001: 35) gives a good example of this when discussing *The Inhuman*: if I get part of an address wrong when sending a letter, the deliverer will in many cases be able to work out where it needs to go and so it will reach its destination; get an email address wrong, and it will be bounced back to the sender. Lyotard argues that human thought can work with imprecise or ambiguous data, data that is not selected by pre-established codes; that it ‘doesn’t neglect side effects or marginal aspects of a situation’; and that humans can intuit, think laterally and operate without rules (2004c: 15). Compared to the strict algorithmic functioning of computers, where thinking is reduced to passing information through a determined sequence of operations, our thought is far more flexible. These ‘intelligent’ surveillance devices are making decisions ordinarily entrusted to humans, with serious consequences (far more so than unsorted correspondence), and yet with a vastly inferior mode of reaching that decision. Third, Lyotard’s concern for saving time in *The Inhuman* plays out here, as such technologies operate in computerised time, or what Manuel Castells called ‘timeless time’ (2006). The speed at which these technologies operate does not reflect the more thoughtful periods at which the human operates. Timeless time ‘refers to a regime of instant communication and information exchange in which there is little time for reflection’ (Gane & Beer 2008: 21). Without time for reflection, the sorts of decisions these technologies make are compromised, as instantaneous processing responds to spontaneous situations without pause for thought. Finally, this way of thinking instantiates computerised capitalism’s disregard for difference. With event-driven CCTV, ludicrously, certain ways of walking or moving or behaving in general are identified as abnormal and, if not criminalised, deemed worthy of further surveillance. As Graham notes, such systems risk further demonisation of minority

groups, something already entrenched in ‘neoliberal [...] landscapes of power’ (2005: 574). For Lyotard, this would illustrate the inhuman effect of a system that operates in ‘gross stereotypes, apparently leaving no place for reflection and education’ (2004c: 64). Whilst the algorithmic software utilised in smart surveillance is presumably – one must presume given that this is proprietary – fine-grained in terms of its analysis of data, the way it would act upon this data is contingent on the sorts of gross stereotypes that Lyotard warns of (for example, with the gait-recognition of smart CCTV the analysis of walking styles is presumably highly detailed but any action on this would have to feed this data through stereotypical portraits of walking styles). With the increasing amount of video content being posted on social networking sites we must anticipate that Internet surveillance will incorporate this new data. We can look to the technologies utilised in our urban spaces to see the limitations of such informational processing of the visual – as well as its dangerous potential.

#### *8.2.4. The Inhumanity of Social Conditioning*

The final exploration through Lyotard of this mode of surveillance involves returning to the second kind of the inhuman, the inhumanity ‘of which the soul is hostage’ (Lyotard 2004c: 2), understood in Sim’s sense as ‘the inhumanity of our social conditioning: the pressure to conform to prescribed modes of behaviour’ (1996: 130).

Social networking profiles, design flourishes aside, tend to be more or less the same. As noted above, standard items of information are displayed, such as name, age/date of birth, relationship status, location, hobbies and interests, and so on, and alongside the user’s photograph this makes up the core of the profile. This information was important for building online communities and initiating friendships with previously unknown individuals in web 1.0, as some marker of shared characteristics and interests was necessary for such formations to be practicable. These standard profiles, as we saw above, were also eventually seen to be beneficial to corporations, as useful demographic data and consumption patterns could be read straight off them. As Wu Song notes, social networking today has moved away from the old ‘visionary communal’ ideals of many web 1.0 communities: we seem no longer to be interested in ‘meeting anyone from anywhere’ (2009: 136). Instead, sites such as Facebook are about maintaining

communications with offline ‘friends’ with some geographically defined commonality: school friends, university friends, work colleagues, and so on. As we saw in the previous chapter, it is possible to divide Facebook ‘friends’ into genuine friends and ersatz-friends along the lines of the division (observed by Lewis & West (2009)) of Facebook use into active and passive. So, why do we continue to include the aforementioned information on our profiles when our friends are highly likely to know what music or films or books we like and when it is difficult to ascertain why we would care whether or not our ersatz-friends, with whom our interaction is passive (so we cannot say that we are attempting to meet them anew, after whatever initial encounter with this stranger led to them being ‘friended’ on Facebook), know that our favourite film is, for example, *Blade Runner*? Why, in other words, this vestigial profile?

It seems, as Zygmunt Bauman (2008c) notes, that we have become accustomed to putting the private into the public domain, as if we no longer see any distinction between the two. The trouble is that this incessant posting of personal information is exactly what speeds up and smoothes out the extension of computerised capitalism by facilitating targeted adverts and marketing strategies, a kind of unwitting self-commodification of the self. We translate our identities into valuable information and post it online, taken hostage by the very logic by which the system operates. One example, recent at the time of writing, will be illustrative. Coca-Cola ran a promotion for its Dr Pepper soft-drink brand on Facebook that involved users allowing their profile status to be hijacked by the corporation (see Dodd 2010). According to Facebook’s Privacy Policy (2010), this interaction with a third-party meant that they could subsequently access information about the user. These kinds of promotions show how users proactively allow personal information to be collected by third-party corporations. Perhaps more worrying, the Dr Pepper example demonstrates the willingness of users to relinquish control over the profile status update, usually a personal expression of current ideas or activities – part of what I have called, in Chapter Three, the portrait avatar, and so a valuable expression of self in encounters – to a product promotion. On the one hand, the expression of thoughts and feelings; on the other hand, the shameless hawking of fizzy pop: the willingness of the user to allow the latter to be represented as the former demonstrates the success of a system that conditions the human to act towards the system’s ends, with little regard for that which is proper to the human. Another

example suggests the further extension of this process: a Facebook application designed by Appirio gives employers access to their employees' social networks, allowing for direct marketing through 'word of mouth referral' within that network; the company increases profits and the employee may earn a bonus dependent on the suitability of their social network (see Andrejevic 2012: 80-81). The idea that one's social network might be not only financially profitable to companies but to the social networker herself suggests a yet further conditioning for individuals to treat something as vital as social relations according to an exploitative logic. And if the canny employee, with an eye for the bonus, begins to build social networks primarily with the potential for profiteering in mind, then the degeneration is yet more marked. If the human is a social animal, then we are witnessing the submission of that which is special to 'being human' to the demands and scrutiny of computerised capitalism.

It is not so much that we are thinking like computers (as Lyotard also worried): we are thinking, communicating and expressing ourselves online like humans. The problem is, we are thinking, communicating and expressing ourselves in accordance with the operating logic of computerised capitalism, extending its operation. We translate everything about us into information in order to exchange it as cultural currency; increasingly we communicate online through bits: unilaterally through profiles and bilaterally through status updates, wall posts, and other textual communication forms. At the same time, we make information exploitable by corporations according to the very operating principles – translation, exchange – of the system itself. The inhumanity of this surveillance is that we internalise, not the gaze (pace Foucault), but the performative logic of computerised capitalism. We are haunted from within, the soul taken hostage (Lyotard 2004c: 2) by this dehumanising spectre.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Adherence to the data protection laws of the UK and Ireland dictates that Facebook are required to send an individual a CD hard copy of all of the information that it has collected from her if she so requests; it is estimated that the average personal data file would be more than 100MB in size and, in PDF form, run to over one-thousand pages



(O'Carroll & Halliday 2011). It must be borne in mind (1) that this vast amount of information is a valuable commodity, (2) that it is mined by algorithmic software – and (3) that the context within which both takes place is the social commerce between people within the Facebook as an online environment. I have attempted here to demonstrate the usefulness of a Lyotardian theoretical understanding of the computerised surveillance that operates through social networking. Such an account crucially includes: the commodification of information; the highlighting of the opacity of surveillance software; and an understanding of the complicity of new technologies of surveillance with the capitalist system, both functioning according to the principle of performativity. Further, the notion of the inhuman was shown to be a tool for opening up several moral questions concerning: the disregard for difference in computerised capitalism played out through surveillance software; the paucity of computerised thinking in 'smart' surveillance technologies; and the social conditioning of citizens into active information sources.

What Lyotard offered in this context that could not be found in Levinas is an appreciation of the interplay of points (1), (2) and (3) above. Chapters Six and Seven were guided by the idea that environment is an important factor in moral responsibility. Levinas does not explicitly acknowledge this point. Now, there is good reason for this: he was concerned with grounding responsibility in subjectivity and so approached ethics from a level of abstraction within which discussion of geographical or environmental factors would have been extraneous to his project. Nonetheless, Levinas' work at all times involves also the empirical encounter, the face-to-face between two people. Since the environments within which these encounters take place have transformed considerably since the publication of, most notably, *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise Than Being*, it is important to go beyond Levinas. This chapter sought to explore what is different about the online environment of social networking and one of the conclusions must be that it is an environment that users occupy for social commerce and yet that is set up today for corporate gain and to extend consumer capitalism (through advertising and data mining). We have already seen the sorts of moral problems this creates and I will argue in the next chapter that this should be prominent in our minds when we assess morality within the new media environment.

Closely related to this, this chapter has sought to pick-out the moral problems inherent to sharing an environment with non-human actors. Again, this forced the discussion beyond Levinas and his humanist ethical theory. In Chapter Two I presented Levinas' ideas on objects; to recall, objects were seen to be passive and consistently used as a negative comparison to people. Again, this is not a criticism of Levinas' project but rather something that needs to be reflected upon today. As we have seen, Facebook is both a social environment and a consumer environment – and the latter operates through 'thinking things', with all the incumbent moral problems outlined above. The conclusion here must be that interactions between people – the empirical encounter – can today take place in environments suffused with non-human agents such that the latter cannot be excluded from considerations of ethical theory. To be clear: this is not to say that moral responsibility is extended to non-human agents but that responsibility between people in a new media environment cannot be considered without factoring in their presence. This is something also to be discussed in the next chapter.

## 9. CONCLUSION: ETHICS, TIME, AND SPACE

Paul Valéry once wrote: ‘For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial’ (1964: 225). Today, such a pace of change seems pedestrian. In order to understand the ethical dimensions of the new media age it is vital that we take into account the time/space dimensions of the environment/s that make it up. Responsibility is spatio-temporal: in so much as it is always a response it takes *place* in *time*. This much is obvious but the spaces in which such responses occur are now shaped by new media or newly created; and since time is social (Adam 1990) we should not assume that the rendering of new social spaces does not change time or change our attitudes to its flow. In what follows I will consider these changes and how the ethical theorist should respond, drawing on previous chapters but concentrating conclusions into three sections that amount to considerations of, respectively: what we can learn about our relationship to the future; about the impact of the time-saving imperative of technologically advanced capitalism on moral space; and about responsibility and disassociation in urban and online spaces.

### 9.1.

In this first concluding section I wish to adopt the following rule of method: ‘State problems and solve them in terms of time rather than space’ (Deleuze 1997: 31). The encounter with the other has an obvious spatial dimension: it takes *place*. When it does not take place we can too readily assume that the problem is wholly spatial in nature; why, we might ask, is such-and-such a space not conducive to moral behaviour? This is an important question and will be addressed below but first of all it is useful to demonstrate that if we restate it in terms of time we can draw some interesting conclusions on ethics in an age of new media. Why, we should ask, is our relationship to time not conducive to moral behaviour in such-and-such a situation? The rule of method this follows, elucidated by Gilles Deleuze, is, of course, one of – indeed the most important of – Henri Bergson’s. Here I will summarise his account of time, demonstrating its presence in the work of Levinas, before applying it to some of the moral problems articulated in earlier chapters.

Bergson observed that we confuse time with space. I will expand upon this distinction in the next section but suffice it to note for now that space is quantity, made up of separate parts that can be measured, whilst time properly understood is the quality of duration. Duration is a flow, a blurring of moments into one another. We conceptually separate things out into past, present, and future but really they blur into one another such that the present contains both the past and the future in a mixed, impure state – the ‘continuity of becoming’ (Bergson 2002a: 125). Bergson writes:

What is, for me, the present moment? The essence of time is that it goes by; time already gone by is the past, and we call the present the instant in which it goes by. But there can be no question here of a mathematical instant. No doubt there is an ideal present – a pure conception, the indivisible limit which separates past from future. But the real, concrete, live present – that of which I speak when I speak of my present perception – that present necessarily occupies a duration. Where then is this duration placed? Is it on the nearer or on the further side of the mathematical point which I determine ideally when I think of the present instant? Quite evidently, it is both on this side and on that, and what I call ‘my present’ has one foot in my past and another in my future (ibid: 127).

Duration is made up of continuous moments, the one not having disappeared when the next emerges. The past blurs into the present and both blur forwards into the future, given the direction of duration.

Levinas’ early work (as we saw in Chapter Two) attempted to understand the ethical encounter in terms of time, influenced heavily by Bergson, and a remainder of this is found in his later work. Beyond Levinas, time and ethics are seldom remarked upon in tandem. There are, of course, exotic thought experiments that hinge on time, such as ticking time-bomb scenarios – should we torture terrorists if there is an imminent threat to life? – or the dilemmas favoured by moral philosophers of an analytic bent: there is only enough time to save one person from a burning building or from drowning in a lake or such like, the question hinging on who one ought to choose to save. We have seen (in Chapter Four) that these sorts of considerations have no place in the work of Levinas, that violence to others or letting others suffer can never be justified, so it should be unsurprising that he does not concern himself with time in this way. There is a more fundamental way that ethics hinges on time, in that the relationship with the other is an ‘awaiting’ to be aspired to (Levinas 2008d: 32), that the movement towards

the other, response, is a movement through time (ibid: 33). In this respect Levinas describes the ethical relationship in terms that sound somewhat similar to Alasdair MacIntyre's (2006) conception of life as a moral quest: the relationship with the other is an 'ethical adventure' (ibid); questing and adventuring having a more evident spatio-temporal dimension than morality and ethics. Responding to others, basically, is in time.

Levinas' account in *Time and the Other* becomes a lot more nuanced than this, drawing heavily upon the philosophy of Bergson in a way that casts all of Levinas' ethical output in the light of time. We should recall this work as laid-out in Chapter Two. To exist, for Levinas, necessitates solitude: the existent can only exist as itself, regardless of all the other things in existence around it. Existing 'concerns no one other than the existent' (ibid: 43). Levinas writes:

Solitude is the very unity of the existent, the fact that there is something in existing starting from which existence occurs. The subject is alone because it is one. A solitude is necessary in order for there to be a freedom of beginning, the existent's mastery over existing – that is, in brief, in order for there to be an existent. Solitude is thus not only a despair and abandonment, but also a virility, a pride and a sovereignty (ibid: 54-55).

So not only does the facticity of existing render us lonely but it is also the condition of our self-concern. This is the hypostasis of the present. We have a self-concerned 'I' who is possessed of freedom – but 'stuck in time' rather than with a freedom to act through time. Solitude is the absence of time; what is more, it has no social dimension and so is insufficient for the needs of the existent. Only when we introduce time can we go beyond this hypostasis, this lonely present.

For Bergson, the future is the emergence of something radically new (Adam 1990: 24). Levinas takes this up, arguing that the future is absolutely other to the present and to that which is pre-existing, that to have a relationship with otherness is to have a relationship with the future. As we saw above, the present and the future are not, for Bergson, separate and likewise Levinas observes that the present must enter into a relationship with the future for there to be a movement of time. This relationship between present and future is 'accomplished in the face-to-face with the Other. The situation of the face-to-face would be the very accomplishment of time; the

encroachment of the present on the future is not the feat of the subject alone, but the intersubjective relationship' (Levinas 2008d: 79). We have seen (in Chapters Five and Six) that the encounter with the other is an event: it is an event in the sense that it is a happening, a movement from the present into the future. The future is ungraspable: when it arrives it is the present and so no longer the future. The other is ungraspable, inaccessible, and so the other is always still to come: the relationship with the other is always in the future. *The relationship with the other is a relationship with the future.* It takes the 'I' out of the hypostatic present, where it is lonely but absolutely free; through the relationship with the other the 'I' moves out of this present and into the future, at the same time trading solitude for a social life. This sustaining sociality comes at a price: the 'I' no longer exists in the security of solitude and now faces a fundamental limitation to its freedom, a limitation that should be familiar by now as responsibility for the other.

What I want to raise is the possibility that one might hold the future in abeyance, so to speak, by enforcing the present – and that this is significant in ethical terms. As Barbara Adam (1990) has also observed, our relationship to the 'radically new' (Bergson) or 'absolutely other' (Levinas) future is not always adventurous. A future so conceived is unpredictable and so there are potentially dangerous consequences that cannot be known in advance. In response we seek to achieve safety, security, and certainty by colonising the future, that is, by extending the present into the future. The present is graspable so, if we can make it endure then we might grasp the future. We can think of numerous ways that this might be achieved but of most relevance is an example offered by Adam herself: erecting a building that will keep us safe in the future. Now, Adam is not reflecting on ethics and my agenda is certainly not to suggest that building a shelter is somehow an inauthentic relationship with the future: such a claim would be frankly ludicrous. However, there is something important to be said about certain kinds of fortification against the insecurity of the ungraspable. In exploring the motivations behind moving to gated communities in Chapter Six, it was observed that alongside more obvious motivations – class identity, the search for community, maintenance of house prices, fear of crime, fear of racial difference – was often cited fear of the other. This 'fear of the other' was shown to be under-developed and so an explanation was sought through an active reading of the ethical theory of Levinas. The unknowable

other, it was argued, is a source of ontological insecurity: we cannot grasp the other, we cannot be secure in proximity to that which is unknown, and so we fear the source of that insecurity. The other was shown to be doubly fearsome, in that the ethical relationship demands leaving one's own security to approach the other without any guarantee that such an approach is desired or will be met with appreciation. To be moral we must confront the unknowable.<sup>17</sup> Or, instead, we can move to gated communities where such encounters can, to a degree, be avoided or controlled.

What we can say now is that such a move consists of the maintenance of a secure present against an unknown future that includes unpredictable encounters with others; even if, as was stated in Chapter Six, this move behind the walls only heightens one's sense of *Unsicherheit*, the motivation is nonetheless to allay this uncertainty. The relationship with the other and the relationship with the future are entwined: both are always yet to come and both are foreclosed by the gated community that keeps its residents stuck in a safe present. Here, on some bizarre level, we see the individual yearning once more for solitude. Remember that solitude, for Levinas, brings virility, pride, and sovereignty. It also brings a sense of despair and abandonment, is insufficiently social, but then those that live behind gates switch on-and-off their solitude, what I have referred to before as selective disassociation. They do not want for a social life, hence bubbled mobility and the obsession with high-speed broadband, but it appears that when it comes to random, unpredictable or unarranged encounters that they do not want their freedom to be hindered. Solitude is the beginning of freedom, a freedom only limited by social commerce. The trick, then, is to make that social commerce unlikely with those others that do not (apparently) merit such self-limitation. Gates and walls and CCTV stop unwelcome others from freely moving near those who install them; add bubbling to the equation and greater control over encounters is exerted. The encounter with the other is a movement through time, always yet to come – a relationship with the future. Something like gating is effectively a colonisation of the future by the present. The conditions of the present are made to endure unchanged into the future. No longer is the future radically new or absolutely other; no longer, then, is there really a relationship with the future – just an obsession with the security of the

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<sup>17</sup> I will explore the theoretical ramifications for this reading of Levinas in the third section of the present chapter.

present. By effectively gating the present there is no relationship with the other in the future because there is no embrace of the ungraspable future, a future ungraspable because it would involve encounters with unknowable others, the very encounters that gating strives to avoid.

Such an orientation towards the future is by no means the preserve of those behind the gates. We can observe a similar relationship to time through social media. Assessing the design and use of social networking sites in Chapter Seven it was argued that they were not conducive to civility in that they did not encourage the user to encounter the stranger as stranger (as Bauman defines civility). Such assessment does not require repetition. What is curious about the strategies of avoiding encounters with the stranger as stranger is that they do not all involve avoiding encounters altogether. Notably, social networking profiles, tweets and updates, and the so-called ‘stalking’ of both do involve an encounter but it is one which is either on the medium’s terms (the profile or the update) or the stalker’s terms. It is here not the encounter with the other that is avoided but the unpredictability of the encounter, its otherness. Levinas describes the relationship with the other as ‘a relationship with a Mystery’ (2008d: 75). This mysteriousness of the other is shared with the future: the future is radically new; the encounter with the other is always in the future. But what if you could take away the mystery? Take, for example, a wine reception for new postgraduates. Imagine you are a third year doctoral student. This meeting in the future involves mingling with people you have not met and cannot know anything about, beyond the fact that they are postgraduates in your discipline. Except, you can know more: you can seek them out on Facebook, ‘stalk’ their online personae such that the mystery of the future event is neutralised. You can know what these new people look like; where they have studied in the past; what films or music they enjoy; and so on. It is now possible to predict the future, if only by taking away some of its unpredictable elements (such as what people at an event will be like). This voyeuristic practice of Facebook stalking allows us to find out all about the stranger without the bothersome business of entering into an encounter with them. When that encounter does take place it lacks the quality of being an opening on to the radically new. It is not a relationship with the future since the encounter took place – unbeknownst to the other – in the past. This is subtly different to the situation explored above through gating; rather than colonising the future with the present, the



future is neutralised in advance: the encounter takes place but it has already taken place and both the other and the future are no longer absolutely other.

If these approaches – using gating to remain in a safe present or Facebook to take the mystery out of the future so as not to confront the radically new – are those of the individual, we can note also cases where the problem is systemic. It has been observed that we live today on ‘the edge of forever’ where ‘the mixing of times in the media, within the same channel of communication and at the choice of the viewer/interactor, creates a temporal collage, where not only genres are mixed but their timing becomes synchronous in a flat horizon, with no beginning, no end, no sequence’ (Castells 2006: 492). Events can now be followed out of sequence and so out of context, rendering them timeless. The sequence of things is disturbed, placing us at ‘the edge of forever’, that is, outside of traditional temporal narrative. Bergson (2002b: 62) observes that if you ignore (or are ignorant of) what precedes a given (ideally conceived) moment then you are stuck in that moment. Since duration is a continuous melding of past, present and future, to exist in a time without sequence – no beginning, no end – is to exist in a stuck-present, to be (conceptually, if not actually) removed from the flow of becoming. If we are on ‘the edge of forever’ because of media then this raises problems for how we respond to events, given that response is the individual’s specific part in the temporality of a given event.

Take the use of new media – for example, Twitter, Google Maps, rolling news, etc. – to follow an event (as explored in Chapter Five). There are two points to be made here. First, those who produce the content that is watched by those caught up in the attacks are responding to a demand for instant coverage of major events. Today these content producers are professionals *and* amateurs, the latter thanks to the user-generated content of web 2.0. In both cases, the cameras (mobile phone cameras, often, in the case of the amateurs) start rolling as soon as possible, and the reporters on the ground start providing information as soon as it is available, all of which in an attempt to give a narrative – or at least some form – to the event as it unfolds. The creation of narrative is probably most ascribable to rolling news, where the demand for instant information meets the demand for coherent stories: something has to give, and we might worry that it is often the former. Stories, as we all know, follow a basic narrative structure of

beginning-middle-end; but in the heat of the moment, in the unfolding of the event, we can only be in the middle. If the outbreak of the event is a break with what went before it (not tautological with that which preceded it – Lyotard; the existence of an inexistent – Badiou: see Chapter Five) then there is no narrative, except until after the fact, when it can be understood historically. For example, when a bomb goes off we can know *that* a bomb has gone off when we are in the middle or the present; but we cannot (in most cases) know *why* the bomb was there, who put it there, and what this means for the future – and as such we cannot know *what is happening*. Yet, since a story is needed, we will find numerous experts and non-experts alike speculating on both. It is as if we are so terrified of the uncertainty of the future that we demand any stab at its prediction; combine this with the lack of immediate knowledge of the past events that led up to this present – this present being the only thing we can be sure of – and we end up with a situation whereby we have a story but one that may bear no relation to the actual past-present-future continuum that it purports to describe. This is why early news accounts of such events can be incorrect: the bombings in Oslo that preceded Breivik’s rampage were the work of Islamic extremists; 9/11 was an accidental plane-crash; the 7/7 bombings in London were a tube crash. The attempt to make a news story coupled with the demand for real-time coverage results in the imposition of a narrative on what can only be conceived of at that moment in time as a present.

New media can have a different effect. Consider the use of Twitter during the Mumbai attacks. Every tweet is a one-hundred-and-forty-character crystallisation of the present. It is instantaneous: being so short and self-contained it has no perceivable temporal extension and should not, as such, be considered as a narrative of the event but rather as a snap-shot – of the present. The problem here is that even when these tweets proliferate they are separate nuggets of information, fragments. If you are following an event though Twitter by searching for trending topics (recall from Chapter Seven that tweets can be marked with a hash-tagged topic name so that all tweets from different users that are on a given topic can be collected together, e.g. #mumbaiattacks) or through Twitterfall (which collects and updates these constantly and in real-time) then you will be presented with a dizzying array of tweets from a myriad of authors, each one intended to be self-contained and none of them adding up to present a coherent story, since a collection of fragments can only be said to add up to a whole if they are of the

same object (and different authors seems to preclude this). Here, real-time coupled with the constraints of a medium that requires instantaneous, bite-sized information, leads to a collection of presents, each one divorced from its past and with no inkling of the future, and none of them adding up to a consistent narrative. Even if, we can say, all the tweets one followed were from the same author they cannot be considered to be a useful narrative since, (1) one would have to get to the end for it to be meaningful and (2) anyway, that tweeter is merely presenting presents and so is offering tweets that do not have a past or future and so do not necessarily fit together: they are separated out such that they do not flow into one another (as Bergson conceives of duration). Further, we should say that, rather than between real-time and narrative, the trade-off this time is between real-time and form: the tweeter needs to give form to the chaotic happening, to that which is not tautological with what preceded it, to that which cannot properly be comprehended: and so we are likely to get something confused or incorrect – or at least banal (in that something historically momentous is presented as some mundane detail, the only thing available to the tweeter in the absence of a more complete understanding of the bigger picture).

The second point is that those who respond to the media presentation of the event are responding to a stuck-present, either one with a false narrative added or one that is an attempt at giving form to something as it unfolds (and so at a point in time in which the form-giver has no idea what it will become). It was suggested in Chapter Five that this ushers in a new way of being-in-the-event: the actor-spectator. We need not go through this again except to think through what it now tells us about time. For example, if you had seen on a rolling news broadcast that the bombing in Oslo was the work of Islamic extremists you might be less guarded when approached by an Aryan-looking Norwegian ‘policeman’ – Breivik. The attempt to fit this into a plausible narrative despite the absence of knowledge about what preceded the bombing meant that those following the news made decisions – and remember from Chapter Four that people were killed assuming that Breivik could not have been the killer – about how to progress into the future based on false reality. Or, if you were attempting to work out what your next move was through Twitter whilst trapped in the Taj Mahal hotel you might endeavour to escape despite the lack of imminent threat (as did Will Pike: see Chapter Five). The reliance on snap-shots gives only a glimpse of an event at one point in time despite the

fact that it is unfolding in a way that can only usefully achieve form in information after the fact, when we know how the unfolding will, well, unfold.

If responding to the other is a relationship with the future then these kinds of inauthentic relationships with the future – with false narratives or snap-shots of a stuck-present – run the risk of getting in the way, of derailing the proper direction into the future, which is to say, of obfuscating what is the correct response to the other. The real-time of the constant flow of information takes a moment out of the sequence of time to be considered in isolation. Without the before there is no direction to what is happening such that we are stuck in the present or attempt to get out of it using an unreliable media narrative; this causes problems for responding morally to events broadcast in such a way. The narrative of the event is disrupted such that it is difficult to respond to others because the unfolding of the event is unclear or not fully presented. This is a problem peculiar to events and should not be extended to all mediated encounters, such as with avatars. With the encounter with the other-avatar the future is not foreclosed, the narrative remains: respond to the other as a relationship with the future. As such the account of avatar ethics in Chapter Three remains pertinent. The difference to be borne in mind here is between the everydayness of the ethical event (the encounter described in Chapters Two and Three) and the event as an aggregate of suffering others with a specific and unusual narrative (as described in Chapter Five). In the former case a refusal of the temporal movement towards the other is an individual matter; in the latter, it is problem of the new media environment itself that attempts to neutralise the uncertainty of the event's future.

So, I have attempted here to articulate three conclusions on time and ethics in the new media age: first, that it is now possible to use a combination of urban and new media technologies to remain stuck in a safe present, to avoid encounters with others that always lie in the future; second, that we use new media technologies to neutralise the mystery of future encounters with the other such that we do not have to confront the radically new of the future. With both 'fear of the other' (Chapter Six) and the refusal to encounter the stranger as stranger (Chapter Seven) there is not just a repulsion of proximity (physical or virtual) but *a repulsion of the future* – and both are ethically significant. Third, and finally, the new media environment's operation in real-time

crystallises the present in a way that makes it difficult to discern the correct path into the future, which is to say, the correct response to the other with whom an encounter is a temporal movement forwards. This is different in kind to the previous two points, since it is not a reflection on the individual's unwillingness to encounter the other; rather, it seems that the demand for real-time information to provide a safety-net to the repulsive uncertainty of the future creates a dangerous confusion for the actor-spectator who would respond to events using their presentation via the media.

## 9.2.

In this second concluding section I want to return to Jean-François Lyotard's account of the inhumanity of development (first discussed in Chapter Eight alongside algorithmic surveillance) in order to reflect on the relationship between 'saving time' and the new media environments in which moral actions would take place.

The subtitle to Lyotard's *The Inhuman* (2004c) is *Reflections on Time* and it is a collection of papers that, although disparate in topic, are all in some way concerned with time. The first of these is perhaps the most challenging to interpret but, I suggest, also the most rewarding for casting light on the inhuman. Noting that the development of an information society is a simple matter of achieving greater efficiency, Lyotard argues that the only limit to this would be the heat death of our sun and the resultant destruction of our solar system. At around 4.5 billion years old the sun is in its middle age, adding urgency to the whole affair. If such a heat death poses a limit to development – which would otherwise be without finality, since its only operating principle is internal improvement – then the challenge for the system, that is, the combined and complicit forces of the sciences, technological innovation and capitalism, is to find a way around this limitation. With the death of the sun comes the destruction of all humanity, along with development, which Lyotard characterises as a parasite to the human host. To survive this, there needs to be found a way for humans to exist outside the solar system, and this job is already underway – it is just that we humans are not really driving it. According to Lyotard, in the technical and scientific research of *all* fields, regardless of what the immediate goal is said to be – war, health, communication,

whatever – the ultimate goal is to make existence possible after the death of the sun. Now, the technological sciences understand the human in technological terms: it possesses hardware, the body, which sustains the capacity for thought; and software, language, which makes thought possible. Of course, the hardware will be consumed in the solar explosion, and so too thought. So, the technological sciences face the problem of designing hardware that can support this software in another environment to that of earth, that is, they face the problem of making thought possible without a body: ‘But “without a body” in this exact sense: without the complex living terrestrial organism known as the human body. Not without hardware, obviously’ (ibid: 14). It falls to roboticists or computer engineers to construct a vessel for human thought, and it falls to artificial intelligence research to create thinking software programs to imbue these machines with thought. In this sense, thought can continue beyond the heat death of the sun and without a human body. Sadly, though, the human race has had it.

It would be easy to dismiss this quasi-science-fictional account as a provocation, or playfulness, or, if taken at face-value, an irrelevance. However, I think Lyotard is here deploying a useful device – a *narrative* device, surely, but more *ontological primitive* than *deus ex machina*. I suggest we read this account as a fable – a story with a moral – that at the same time illustrates and underwrites Lyotard’s entire project in *The Inhuman*. The true meaning of this story is that advanced capitalism seeks only to advance further. As such, it must become more efficient, which involves saving time, efficiency being the driving force of development. The end time brought about by the heat death of the sun is really just a motif that represents an unwillingness to be limited in any way – that is, a refusal to stop the advance. This imperative to speed-up is applied without concern for the human cost, without any concession to humanist projects or ideals. Lyotard’s odd story demonstrates that amongst the limitations to development to be avoided are any concerns for the human consequences. Saving time is paramount; development is good in itself: there is no place for that old-fashioned idea of the good being that which is for the betterment of human society.

There is a literal reading of this story that emphasises the replacement of the human with technologies. Such a reading would see Lyotard’s text as a warning about the posthuman, the weight of which is carried by his comparison of human reflective

judgement with computer determinant judgment, categories taken from the work of Immanuel Kant. This has already been explored in the previous chapter through surveillance technologies and there are many other situations in which this could be put to work – Stuart Sim (2001) thinks through some of them in his book on Lyotard and the inhuman – but this is not the place to rehash such arguments: they would not be too different in form from those presented previously in the surveillance context. Instead, I want to take this concern for the replacement of the human with technologies in a different direction, staying with Lyotard’s readings of Kant, but returning this time to his work on the sublime.

It may appear odd that *The Inhuman* begins with an essay on solar catastrophe and thought without a body and yet also contains essays on the sublime, as in ‘Newman and the Instant’, but recall the distinction made (in Chapter Three and reiterated in Chapter Five) between the beautiful and the sublime: the beautiful exists in the world – there are things that are identifiably beautiful – whilst the sublime exists in ideas only, the remainder left to thought when it tries to think the unthinkable. Doubtless, if beauty exists in the world and is therefore measurable, we could write software that would be capable of judging what is and is not beautiful. Such software would be a boon for matching people on online dating sites. But no software could be capable of the sublime feeling because not only would that demand that it attempt to ‘think’ beyond the strict limitations of its programming – which is (currently) by definition impossible – but because the sublime feeling requires the experience of pleasure and pain, the experience of the mind’s faculties exceeded. I have argued (in Chapter Three) that the way that the other exceeds the idea we have of the other in the mind is evocative of the sublime feeling. That is to say, that the encounter with the other takes the ‘I’ out of totality – what can be contained in thought – and into a relationship with infinity. The way that the other escapes the grasp, resists thought, is sublime. As such, to encounter the other brings about the ‘pain’ of that which resists thought and the absolute freedom of the ‘I’ – this resistance being experienced as, what I have called, moral humility – but also the ‘pleasure’, or what I have called moral enthusiasm, of the sociality this creates for an otherwise solitary existent. I have also argued that such encounters are ethical events and that these ethical events – one-to-one encounters – are what make up major events such as terrorist attacks (see Chapter Five). That is to say, these really big events are

really just a collection of ethical encounters and are no bigger than the sum of their parts. Further, the sum of their parts is not some sort of ethical addition – we cannot add together all the individual ethical events (encounters) to create one big Ethical Event; there is no responsibility to the event itself, only to individuals caught up in them – but rather an amount of suffering so vast that it cannot be comprehended. As such the event evokes the sublime feeling, this time in the sense that it invokes in the mind unimaginable levels of suffering. The only response to this is to act to alleviate the suffering of the individuals involved. If the sublime exists only in human thought and is, as I have argued, part of ethical experience, then we must conclude that thinking things can never be moral, that they can never have a relationship with the infinite which would humble them and make them enthusiastic for ethical sociality. We can add to the limitation of computer thought – the inflexibility and programmed alterphobia (discussed in Chapter Eight) of, for example, smart surveillance systems – its unavoidable amorality. When responsibility for certain actions is devolved to technological apparatuses in order to increase efficiency it passes to something that is incapable of possessing this responsibility. Lyotard’s point about ‘thought without a body’ is really that in a system of advanced capitalism, technological advance is seen as good in itself, and now we can say that this is without consideration for the consequences of employing technologies, in human environments, that are incapable of making moral judgements, in the sense of attempting to make a judgement without criteria of judgement in the face of the infinite – in the encounter with the other. This is a moral problem that a reading of Levinas alone – with his description of objects as passive (see Chapters Two and Eight) – would have missed.

If development requires the constant saving of time in order to increase efficiency and to keep it motoring along, then replacing humans with technologies has an obvious draw: the latter operate much more quickly. They can communicate with each other in fractions of seconds, transmitting valuable information in the blink of an eye. This invisible functioning has led to the idea of ‘timeless time’ (Castells 2006), a transformation of time that challenges the clock of modernity, the compression of time by new technologies until it ‘disappears’, at least from human perception. Here we see that the time-saving technologies discussed by Lyotard, the efficient transmission of information, near instantaneously, changes social time. Long distance communication



with others now occurs in real-time, such that there is a ‘temporal immediacy’ or ‘simultaneity’ (Castells 2006: 491). Beyond personal relationships, this simultaneity extends to distant events, such that we can watch history being made without any time lag. This poses a sort of double-edged sword: it can bring events to our attention such that distance is no longer a barrier to global responsibility; and it can do this so fast that there is no time for reflection to make the appropriate decisions in response. This dichotomy is fully contained in the work of Adam (1995), who does not seem to see the tension. Reflecting on the First World War she states that the modern technologies used separated time from distance, and meant that decisions about the war were required immediately, without time for diplomacy. This leads her to argue that ‘[t]he enormous speed coupled with multiple, simultaneous, reflexive connections poses problems at the level of perception, understanding, expectation and action: it constitutes at all these levels an unconquered reality’ (1995: 112). It is slightly baffling, then, that the same phenomenon is later argued to cause distance to lose ‘its barrier quality’ such that responsibility becomes global amidst instantaneity and simultaneity (ibid: 114). Adam writes: ‘With a globalized present responsibility extends beyond representatives in local and national governments to the individual: it inescapably connects the global with the local and personal’ (ibid: 115). That is, there is a move from political responsibility to personal, moral responsibility. But how is this acted upon when the same phenomenon ‘poses problems at the level of perception, understanding, expectation and action’? She does not say.

So, does the obsolescence of space make moral action easier or harder? This is a false choice. We should instead choose to question this supposed obsolescence of space. This becomes clear if we turn once again to the work of Bergson, or at least Deleuze’s reading: ‘we make time into a representation imbued with space. The awkward thing is that we no longer know how to distinguish in that *representation* the two component elements which differ in kind, the two pure *presences* of duration and extensity’ (1997: 22). This is what appears to happen in the idea of timeless time, a thorough mixing of technological extension through space with duration. Spatially, things differ in degree whilst temporally they differ absolutely, in kind: different ‘durations’ have their own internal rhythm, their own way of being in time. Technologies and humans, in so far as their operation is concerned, differ only in degree: technologies are imperceptibly

quicker but this speed is really a measurement of the environment/s in which they act. If we are to judge technological time against human time then we are already placing the two on the one scale, such that this can only ever be a judgement of degree. What appears to be at issue with timeless time is the movement of a technological happening – the transmission of information, say – rather than a philosophical account of absolute difference in terms of internal duration, which for Bergson is of the mind. The problem of timeless time is poorly stated: what is really at issue is the technological traversal of space. Really, timeless time is a kind of clock-timeless space, the extension of a technological action through space beyond the human's perceptive capacity (clock measurement).

This is not to discount the idea of timeless time but rather to focus the attention on what it is really telling us about: space. I have argued (in Chapters Four and Five) that the speed at which technologies process information allows no time for reflection: they can put a course of action in motion before a human being could reflect on what was the correct course of action. This, in a slightly different way, is what Adams is getting at with her example of modern technology in the First World War: diplomacy goes out of the window if the enemy can strike with speed, before the diplomatic wheels could ever be put fully in motion. These both still stand as correct but Adam claims that it is the result of time being separated from space, yet duration has always been separate from space and what is commonly called time is a conceptual *spatialisation* of duration. This is why Adam has missed the tension in her work: she thinks that time has been separated from space such that space is an irrelevance. This is where her global responsibility comes from, an irrelevance of space plus the instant transmission of events.

It is absolutely correct that new media bring suffering to our attention near instantly and that this bypasses politics to an extent, in order to open up a personal relationship between the receiver of the images of suffering and those suffering. This takes us away from politics and towards morality precisely because it is instant and individual: action need no longer be retrospective but spontaneous, without political decision-making; and the relationship is one-to-one, with an emphasis on what the individual is compelled to do in response. For this reason we can say once more (after my initial reflections in

Chapter Two) that the ethics of Levinas is well suited to this environment. What needs to be acknowledged, though, is that the instantaneous manner in which suffering is transmitted to the individual is not an indicator that space is obsolete: this timeless time is merely a clock-timeless space – space traversed, not bypassed. Events are brought to the attention, their ethical dimensions consisting of sublime levels of unimaginable suffering; likewise, individuals are engaged with at a more personal level as avatars, opening up moral relationships. But where technologies are adept at traversing this space near-instantaneously, the sort of response called for is not necessarily going to fare as well. Images are transmitted faster than are actions. Consider the recent riots in the UK, discussed in Chapter Four, where it was fairly easy (ethically speaking) to have become involved in encouraging the looting because of the innocuousness of both the means of encouragement (especially BlackBerry Messenger) and of the environment such means are utilised in. Would it have been just as easy to stop the looting, to do what one considered morally right to stop other suffering? Clearly social media could be used to express dissatisfaction with the events, but it is far from clear that proactively arranging rioting and reactively – borderline passively – decrying rioting are actions that are equally forceful from a distance. Of course, there does not have to be such a face-off between good and bad, as is clear if we consider the examples of 9/11, the Norway shootings, web-cam suicides, etc.: it is far easier to transmit across distance the image of someone suffering than it is to transmit the action of preventing that suffering. This was the problem with Meek's (forthcoming) account of moral awareness leading to moral action (discussed in Chapter Four): the kinds of actions available seemed inadequate to shape what one has become aware of – precisely because of the persistence of space, the distance involved and the time it would take to traverse it (recall that his idea of moral actions were longer-term projects rather than responses to suffering). So, images of suffering open up individual moral relationships because they can be transmitted instantly to individual users across great distances, thus bypassing the reliance on political intervention (in the sense that we can now feel that it is up to us to make a difference); but, as with diplomacy in the First World War, there may simply be no time – no technological speed to match that of the transmission of the images – in which to act across that same distance to prevent greater suffering. Space remains in place; far from being obsolete, it is an important variable when considering the initiation of moral responsibility and the enactment of a response. It can render online interaction passive,

moral responsibility – deprived of the ability to respond – voyeuristic. We must not lose sight of space when considering the time of technologies; timeless time means that we are aware of suffering we would not ordinarily be privy to – but the persistence of space means response is limited.

Words should not be minced: *it is more surprising that anyone would think that the development of new technologies would open up new moral spaces than the fact that they evidently have not.* Speed of transmission makes technologically advanced capitalism more efficient; if we follow Lyotard then this is the key reason why the technologies we have come into existence, from email to Twitter. The only demand placed on these technologies is that they efficiently transmit information; so we get the situation described above: images of suffering, yes; the means to do something about it, no. Why this should surprise us of technologies designed simply to ping information around is difficult to fathom. Paul Virilio once scoffed: ‘Don’t tell me that the Internet will bring about world democracy. I split my sides at that. There’s nothing more ridiculous. The Internet is just a product sample for the electronic highways’ (in Virilio & Lotringer 1997: 186). I see no reason to alter this observation if we apply it to new media and morality, although I do not share his mirth. What is interesting is the way that the environments in which we operate online are shaped by the very demand to save time. Social networking profiles set out valuable information in a way easily readable and exploitable, all the better for speeding up exchange; geo-tagging, as with Facebook Places, takes this process out into the real world of shops and restaurants, using users’ locations to market promotions and collect geodemographic data; and status update promotions and voluntary exploitation of one’s social network for market research (through the Appiro application) show how users become complicit. There are, as I have argued in Chapter Eight, moral problems with these developments: the commodification of subcultures; the tolerance of inequality as creating niche markets; the reduction of difference groups to the same; and the abandonment of those who do not submit to this surveillance. These problems have been given due attention previously and so what I want to argue here is that the surveillance to which social networkers are subjected directly affects the way that these users encounter each other, such that spaces are created that are not conducive to civility.

To recall the discussion in Chapter Seven, the notion of civility favoured is that of Bauman, for whom it means *the willingness to encounter strangers as strangers*. First, it was argued that Facebook ‘friends’ were made up of both genuine friends and ‘ersatz-friends’, the latter a new breed of strangers with whom we now have a more lasting tie than hitherto possible. With the former users, interaction is active, taking on the full range of communicational options provided by the site: comments, wall posts, IM chat, private messages, and so on. With the latter users, interaction is passive, with little communication after the ersatz-friend has been added to the friends list, and the most predominant interaction is the unilateral reading of profile information, wall posts, and comments, and the viewing of photographs. Users’ motivations for accumulating hundreds of Facebook friends would make for interesting research, albeit research beyond the scope of the present work. What we can say is that such excessive friend accumulation is desired by the owners of Facebook and actively encouraged. At no point does Facebook stop recommending new friends for users to add – and we have already seen, in Chapter Eight, why this is the case. The sort of information that can be mined from these networks is valuable: first, it is possible to create a profile of what people like the user like and buy; second, the more friends a user has the more market research they have gathered and so the more profitable it is for them and their employer if exploited through the Appiro application discussed (also in Chapter Eight). The bigger the network, the more valuable the information, and so the kind of mass ‘friendship’ that sees a schism between active and passive interaction, genuine- and ersatz-friends, is encouraged. Surveillance and the practice of civility – the lack of which was explored in relation to ersatz-friends (Chapter Seven) – are directly linked.<sup>18</sup>

Second, it was argued that the profiles utilised in social networking act as a barrier to entry. By forcing potential users to translate their personality into a set of fields – such as favourite films or educational history – the way in which that user will be

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<sup>18</sup> Of course, the emic strategy of personalising space was explored in Chapter Seven but this was to show how the hundreds of millions of users of Facebook are generally inaccessible, with a relatively small friendship list in the mere hundreds maintained. This is fully compatible with the interested encouragement to add ersatz-friends since these lists are still massive in comparison with offline friendship groups and, in fact, are valuable precisely because they are managed, creating networks of similarly consuming individuals. It was further argued that moderators would evict users who break the code of conduct and we can tentatively hypothesise that this performs the role of maintaining an environment in which people feel safe to interact – such that all that valuable information keeps on accumulating.

encountered is prescribed. That is, this is not necessarily an encounter with a stranger in all their strangeness but really a pre-determined range of traits, the same for everyone, that the stranger may (or may not) identify with. This makes it unnecessary to practice civility if the interaction is only passive, that is, if it goes no further than engaging with that user's profile, such that we can call this environment phagic in design. It also makes moving from passive to active interaction less likely with ersatz-friends. If the ersatz-friend wears all their information on their profile, or at least the kind that might make up an average conversation, then there is little need to go beyond this and to engage in conversation. Instead, since the strangeness of the stranger is undesired, we get the voyeurism of Facebook stalking, whereby we can gleam what we want of this other user without having to engage with her or – what is worse – allowing her to get too close. We saw in the previous chapter why these profiles exist: the information presented can be read straight off them and tailored adverts targeted at that user. This demand for users to make themselves data-minable creates a space in which people present themselves to others in a way divested of any strangeness and that makes possible voyeurism rather than engagement. Civility is unnecessary in such an environment.

Finally, it was argued that status updates and tweets are indifferent to their audience and encourage talking-at rather than talking-with. These are central features to both Facebook and Twitter: regularly updated, character-restricted, statements regarding what the user is doing or thinking. We saw in the previous chapter how users are being incentivised to hand over this mode of self-expression to product promotion. It is also the case that users' updates are exploited anyway. With Facebook, the mention of certain brands will determine what adverts are presented on the webpage and will also lead to suggestions for fan groups. For example, anecdotally, after posting an update referring to the obvious 'coke' use of a certain celebrity, I was invited to join a group for fans of Coca-Cola: wrong 'coke', obviously, but it demonstrates that updates are processed to create brand awareness (with little creative flexibility, if we are to think back to the discussions of the inhuman). Given the frequency with which such posts are made, and their uninhibited nature, the yield for surveilling updates and tweets is great. It has also become common – as I first noticed during the opening credits of the teen-

soap *Hollyoaks* – for companies to promote hash-tags<sup>19</sup> (e.g. #hollyoaks) such that they encourage others to tweet about their products (without remuneration, of course). As such, tweeting and updating – a form of communication that promotes the monologue over conversation, indifference over civility – is encouraged precisely because it is profitable.

So, through thinking about the impact of saving-time on the spaces in which we interact, a simple conclusion can be drawn about the new media age: beware the environments it creates. Increasingly, the human environment is shared with technologies employed for their efficiency but that cannot be moral agents. This is hardly surprising but it does mean that we need to be aware of their amoral operation, this inhuman backdrop to human interaction. Further, ethical encounters through avatars of various kinds take place in environments that seek to make capitalism more efficient – and the ways they do this shape how we interact with others. Such fundamentally human events as ethical encounters – in so far as they are not contributing to the ongoing development of the system – need not be encouraged or, worse still, facilitated, and are not in spaces that are designed without civility. Saving time impacts upon the operation and design of online environments which, in turn, impacts negatively upon their ethical dimensions. New media increasingly provide the environment for human interactions, for example, Facebook, as well as the way we become aware of suffering and responsibilities, as with media events relayed through YouTube or Twitter. Without taking into account the inhumanity of which Lyotard speaks, without recognising the dangers of the system in which we operate, and the threat it poses to what it means to be human – chief amongst this our moral being – we treat our environment as neutral when it is not. We can ill afford to assume that the new media environment is a blank slate, that it is not shaped by the demand to save time and increase profit. Of course moral relationships can take place through social media, as with the account of avatar ethics I have given in Chapter Three; but ethical theory cannot ignore the vested interests in new media that shape the environment in which these encounters take place. And let us once-and-for-all drop this naivety about their potential for some sort of moral revolution. New media are information-swapping technologies; they can show us

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<sup>19</sup> Recall that hash-tagging identifies a certain tweet to be part of a wider ‘trending’ topic, creating a massive collection of monologues masquerading as a conversation between many participants; see Chapter Seven.

suffering as never before – but the brute fact of the persistence of space means that the ability to respond is no less beholden to geography than it ever was. New media are more likely to make voyeurs of us than significantly improve the amount of good in the world; and, since information exchange is ultimately about profit, this is a result that is of little consequence to the advance of capitalism.

### 9.3.

I want to start this final concluding section with a conversation between two thinkers who understood well and early the importance of space for moral considerations: Friedrich Engels and Walter Benjamin. This is one of those unilateral exchanges through history that one stumbles upon like an eavesdropper, retiring with more than a sum of the parts, benefitting from the presence of two interlocutors and the spaces that open up between them – in this case, suggesting lines of flight for organising reflections on new media, space, and ethics. Engels sets the topic in his *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1971), an extensive study of London and the industrial cities of the north that he visited as a young man in the first half of the nineteenth-century. He observed: ‘The more that Londoners are packed into a tiny space, the more repulsive and disgraceful becomes the brutal indifference with which they ignore their neighbours and selfishly concentrate upon their private affairs’ (ibid: 31). Engels recognised that this individualisation was characteristic not only of London, but of modernity in general, claiming, however, that it was nowhere more pronounced than with the crowds of England’s capital. Of London – and also Manchester, Birmingham, and Leeds – he concludes: ‘Here indeed human society has been split into its component atoms’ (ibid).

One can unproblematically maintain that this picture of the city is familiar to us today. What is contended – by Benjamin, at least, in his essay ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ (1999b) – are the value judgements made of this state of affairs. He writes of Engels’ account:

It lacks the skill and ease with which the *flâneur* moves among the crowd and which the journalist eagerly learns from him. Engels is dismayed by the crowd; he responds with a moral reaction, and an aesthetic one as well; the speed with which people rush past one another



unsettles him. The charm of his description lies in the intersecting of unshakeable critical integrity with an old fashioned attitude. The writer came from a Germany that was still provincial; he may never have faced the temptation to lose himself in a stream of people (ibid: 163).

So, the essence of Benjamin's complaint is that Engels is too moralistic about his shockingly new experience of the big-city crowd, about which he is not, apparently, alone – 'Fear, revulsion, and horror were the emotions which the big city crowd aroused in those who first observed it' (ibid: 169), remarks Benjamin – and that he has failed to see the new freedom of the flâneur in this scene. This is grossly unfair. The remarks of Engels referred to by Benjamin – he quotes a lengthier passage than that reproduced above but I have presented the nub of the matter raised by Engels – come in a chapter on 'The Great Towns' of England. Engels begins with these reflections on the indifference of people towards people in the hustle-bustle crowd but quickly moves into comprehensive accounts of workers' living conditions and the general squalor of the city. His point could not be clearer: it is precisely in the most abhorrent conditions, within scenes of the most appalling human suffering, that we at the same time find indifference towards the distress of other people. Not that the reader need make this connection of their own, since Engels makes it explicit: 'Everywhere one finds on the one hand the most barbarous indifference and selfish egotism and on the other the most distressing scenes of misery and poverty' (1971: 31). To claim that Engels is practising an old-fashioned moralism is somewhat baffling; he is observing human suffering and the response of those proximate to it, so his moralising is not out of place and his attitude not out of time, since I hope that we can all agree that omission of action in such circumstances is, at the very least, a cause for critical reflection on how such a state of affairs comes about.

What of the disparity between Engels' account and Benjamin's flâneur? This notion, brought into the world by the surrogate Charles Baudelaire but put through its paces by Benjamin, is of a stroller who experiences the city through his wanderings. Benjamin describes him as a 'man of leisure' (1999b: 169) capable of losing himself in the crowd, which is to say, who is not struck by the revulsion, fear, and horror that apparently afflicts Engels. There is clearly a time and a place for the flâneur, and I would not like to deny that there is a great pleasure in roaming the streets of an unfamiliar city, but Engels' concern was not with the 'man of leisure' but the 'man of work', whose

conditions were abominable. He was not concerned with the individual's ability to 'lose himself in the crowd' but with the willingness of that individual to 'lose' others completely, to turn a blind eye to their suffering. Engels' took the approach of studying the conditions of this suffering, only flagging up this moral dilemma; what is required is an explanation for this state of affairs, an ethical theory that can take account of it.

There is a curious line in Engels' text that reads: 'Everyone turns his house into a fortress to defend himself – under the protection of the law – from the depredations of his neighbours' (1971: 31). These figurative fortresses have today taken a literal form, the gated community. It is left open to the reader to wonder about the depredations of the neighbour: what predatory attacks would Engels be referring to? Today we might say that it is of little matter what the actuality of this depredation is, that what matters is the idea in the mind that one is vulnerable to one's neighbours, to those that surround one's home. We find gated communities in areas where the risk of others is perceived to be high: in the major cities of Brazil; in Los Angeles; in the mash-up of class and ethnicity that is London; and, as we have seen in Chapter Six, in Teesside. These also happen to be areas where poverty, for many, is high. Poverty and crime combine to reinforce the sort of fear that leads to gating. Once more then we find the cruellest indifference towards others amidst poor conditions. Moralising is to be avoided, lest accusations of possessing charming, old-fashioned values be levelled. But the ethical theorist must explain this, since it runs counter to the basics of morality, that is, that one respond to suffering where one can.

One aspect of Engels' account that does not quite tally today is his claim that human society has been split into atoms. We see instead that a given social space may indeed be so divided, but that atoms are nonetheless networked beyond that particular locale. That is, the occupant of a gated community may well have withdrawn from the immediate social space whilst remaining very much in place, but they are not hermits. Gated communities are virtual communities, they are advertised as possessing the state-of-the-art when it comes to ICTs since, and after all, complete isolation would be a high cost to pay for withdrawal from one's immediate surroundings. We should understand gated communities as protected nodal points in a circuit-board society. One can maintain social relations whilst ignoring one's neighbours (those outside the gates). Of

course, the compulsion of proximity is great and so virtual relations will never suffice: we all still want to get out there and meet people, and the occupants of gated communities appear no different. Today, new media are revolutionary in terms of mobility around urban space. This works in two ways. First, unnecessary excursions into urban space can, to a greater extent than ever before, be avoided – managed through the spastic mode of selective disassociation discussed in Chapter Six. Social media can be used to maintain relationships regardless of geographical distance between people such that it is no longer essential to meet face-to-face if one wants to live a social life, something that feeds into the viability of gated existence (and, it should be noted, is supported by my account of avatar ethics in Chapter Three). Second, face-to-face meet-ups can be choreographed using social media such that we can control more exactly when and whom we meet; random encounters with others can be negotiated or avoided by the combination of this ability to more precisely organise social meet-ups with bubbled mobilities, trajectories into urban space that are private or defended.

This applies universally to users of new media, not just to those behind the gates. They too can exert greater control over who they encounter using new media. It is also the case that they can construct their own ‘bubbles’ when out and about. Between headphones and wi-fi, social space has subtly changed. Why talk to one’s neighbour on the train when one’s friends are accessible via a Facebook application on a smart phone? Or pour one’s lovesick heart out to the barman in the pub when you can use the same smart phone to meet new singles in your area through online dating? To possess an iPhone is to be constantly in possession of a newspaper, a television, a computer – and, of course, a telephone. When someone is oblivious to what is going on around them we say that they are lost in their own little world. It seems more accurate to conclude of mobile media that we carry a window onto a wider world, that we are no longer limited to the claustrophobic environment around us – and all those strange people within it. It is often said that new technologies have shrunk the world; the local shrinks too, and one can easily step outside of it. Again, the point is not to make value judgements when people choose to disengage with their surroundings and take control of who they encounter, but this selective disassociation is not without ethical consequence. When we can so readily choose who we encounter, or simply just ignore

what is occurring around us by immersing ourselves in mobile media, we have to answer to Engels' complaint – the indifference is brutal.

What of the new media environment itself? The environments they create can also be fortified against the depredations of the neighbour, such that we might talk of 'online gating'. The profile used in social networking is like the gap between the bars in the gate; just as passers-by are afforded a partial view of the occupants' existence, so too can browsers only see 'bits' of the reality of the user. The friends list is analogous to the residents of the gated compound, 'people like us' who are allowed into the fold. Blocks and filters work as gates and walls, keeping the strange out and affording the user control over the traffic through the online environment. The codes of conduct that users sign up too (often unwittingly) are much like the residents' agreements that dictate how those behind the gates ought to behave. These codes are enforced by the moderators, who act much like a committee of residents; fail to conform, and the moderators become security guards, casting the now strange users from the fold. A laboured analogy, perhaps, but merited in that it poses questions about how we view the way online environments are designed, including the control they afford users over encounters. What, then, should we say of the environments we create online? We saw in Chapter Six how technologies (urban, vehicular, and the Internet) were used to control the urban environment of face-to-face encounters. It is also the case that within the environments created online there is control over, this time, virtual encounters. Selective disassociation – that is, limiting interaction to those who are similar – is echoed, achieved through emic and phagic strategies (see Chapter Seven).

To bring all of this together, if we reflect on both gating and online gating in light of mobile media use in the urban context, there adds a new dimension to total gating. Not only do residents of gated communities occupy a counterpart city; not only do they combine this with ICT use to reinforce their control over the urban environment (selective disassociation); but now the online environments they can occupy at their nodal points are seen to resemble the very gated, counterpart city they have created in the urban environment. China Miéville could not make it up. In his *The City & The City* (2010) two cities occupy the same space and residents from one parallel city are forbidden from entering the other parallel city; with total gating, occupants of one

environment (*the city*) are forbidden from entering a parallel environment (the counterpart city created by gating) – and if the others get too close then there is another parallel environment (the online environment fashioned after the gated environment) that they are also forbidden from entering and into which the gated residents can retreat. The ability to disengage from the local environment has never been so pronounced or so achievable.

We need to understand why these various strategies of disengagement are employed if we are to understand Engels' problem of indifference and suffering occupying the same space. The idea that there is a repulsion of proximity has been explored through the work of Levinas in Chapters Six and again in relation to Facebook stalking in Chapter Seven. This demands further attention, not least of all because it is not uncontroversial. In what follows I will seek out the consequences of this reading of Levinas, how it stands alongside other readings and what it forces us to reassess. The idea that we might fear or be repulsed by the other seems to fly in the face of characterisations of Levinas' work by influential contemporary theorists. They see the other as repulsive, as I do, but see this as jarring with their view of Levinas' supposedly domesticated or gentrified other to whom we are compelled to behave morally. Alain Badiou, for one, is highly critical of the idea that ethics can be grounded in the encounter with the other. For Badiou, we only tolerate the other if the other is good: not Muslims (fundamentalist), or Africans (barbarians), or Chinese (totalitarian), and so on. Which is to say, we only tolerate the other – Levinas would say feel responsibility to act with responsibility towards the other – if the other is in fact the same: 'Become like me and I will respect your difference' (Badiou 2002: 25). At the heart of this is a rejection of the very existence of the other: 'There is never "the Other" as such. There are projects of thought, or of actions, on the basis of which we distinguish between those who are friends, those who are enemies, and those who can be considered neutral' (Badiou in Cox, Whalen & Badiou: 2001). The basic error in Badiou's reading of the Levinasian other is that it assumes characteristics – similarity to myself, dissimilarity to myself, fundamentalist, enemy, etc. – when picking out characteristics is precisely what takes one away from understanding the notion of the other. Slavoj Žižek picks up on this misreading of Levinas, noting that Badiou's error is to reduce the other to the enemy and so to gloss over the other's transcendence: 'We should never reduce the Other to our enemy, to the

bearer of knowledge and so forth: always in him or her there is the Absolute of the impenetrable abyss of another person' (2002: 67). Totalitarian Chinese, barbaric African: the characteristics fade away to the absolutely other. Badiou seems to conflate responsibility for the other with an ethics of difference, that meek prescription to tolerate or respect the peculiar, a sort of ant-racist, multi-cultural doctrine that seems to have gripped the Western world in place of anything recognisable as responsibility. Badiou's rejection of this I applaud; his ascription of this to Levinas must be dismissed. Tolerance and respect do not come into it – only responsibility.

Slavoj Žižek's recognition of Badiou's mistake is by no means a defence of the Levinasian position. In the same pages of *Welcome to the Desert of the Real!* Žižek attacks 'the notion that "respect for Otherness" is the most elementary ethical axiom', asking why we must respect the abyss created by the transcendent nature of Levinas' other (2002: 67-68). We might again question this use of 'respect' rather than 'responsibility', and further highlight that respect for *otherness* is not the same as responsibility for *the other* (the difference between respecting somebody because of their otherness and being responsible for the person who is other), but Žižek's commentaries on Levinas raise a far more pressing discussion on the nature of the other. In his *Violence*, Žižek (2008: 47) recognises an 'obverse and much more unsettling dimension to the Levinasian figure of the Neighbour as the imponderable Other who deserves our unconditional respect'. That is, what if the imponderable other, whose intentions are totally unknown to us, is so foreign that no authentic encounter could be possible? Žižek notes that 'Levinas did not have this dimension in mind' but that 'the radical ambiguity' of Levinas' other leads to this reading (ibid). He concludes: 'Horrible as it may sound, the Levinasian Other as the abyss of otherness from which the ethical injunction emanates and the Nazi figure of the Jew as the less-than-human Other-enemy originate from the same source' (ibid). We are left with the impression of the monstrous dimension of the other, an object, not of morality, but of fear. For Žižek, like Levinas, the other is first and foremost imponderable, unfathomable. Where Levinas highlights 'the stranger in the neighbour' (2008c: 123), Žižek concurs, observing that 'an alien traumatic kernel forever persists in my neighbour' (2006a: 43). Where the two depart is in what happens next. Žižek writes: 'The temptation to be resisted here is the ethical domestication of the neighbour – for example, what Emmanuel Levinas did with his

notion of the neighbour as the abyssal point from which the call of ethical responsibility emanates. What Levinas obfuscates is the monstrosity of the neighbour' (ibid). In other words, the other is a source of terror; what is needed is an ethics that confronts the monstrous core of humanity (ibid: 46), something that, according to Žižek, Levinas fails to address (see Žižek 2006b: 158).

Žižek concludes that some alienation from others is good, since we avoid the monstrosity and any dangerous repercussions. That said, Žižek does not ground responsibility in the encounter with the other, making such a conclusion viable – yet unsatisfactorily amoral. Žižek has presented a substantial challenge to the grounding of morality in the abyssal other; but the danger would be to reject Levinas outright. What I want to suggest is that to encounter the Levinasian other is at the same time to confront the monstrous core of humanity *and to enter into a moral relationship with it*. Žižek warns us against 'gentrifying' the notion of the neighbour (2006b: 163), and he is right: but the other need not be domesticated, need not be – what? – lovely, in order for it to be the locus of moral behaviour. My approach here has been covered in greater detail in Chapter Six but recall that I considered the other as the source of a two-fold ontological insecurity. Unknowable – forever 'the stranger in the neighbour' – the other is unsettling, provoking anxiety and fear: we cannot know what there is with the other. Further, the infinite demands that are placed on the 'I' in the encounter with the other are a source of further ill-ease, responsibility initiated against the will as the 'I' is 'ordered toward the face of the other' (Levinas 2008c: 11). The Levinasian ethical encounter involves being-towards-the-other *despite oneself*, adding an element of terror that Žižek does not here acknowledge. Reading Levinas in such a way, we need not lose sight of the monstrosity of the other. More than this, we need not recognise a choice between moral responsibility and monstrosity: the demands of the former are the basis of the latter. The notion of 'the stranger in the neighbour' suggests a sort of pervasive suspicion, or the terror of never knowing those in close proximity to us – what I have termed *the repulsion of proximity*. Further, when Žižek suggests that the Levinasian other and the Nazi conception of the Jew are one-and-the-same we should agree: the other, without characteristics, is a source of anxiety onto which such characteristics can be dangerously projected. We should agree with Žižek that the other is a source of fear, that we might find the other monstrous; but we should reject the idea that this is

somehow incompatible with moral responsibility for that other. In short, to be in proximity with the other is to be in a state of ontological insecurity that we find repulsive – *and at the same time to be part of an ethical encounter*.

Such a position, introduced in Chapter Six, would represent a departure from the notion of ontological in/security articulated in the work of Anthony Giddens. In *The Consequences of Modernity* Giddens writes that ontological security is

the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in *the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action*. A sense of *the reliability of persons* and things, so central to the notion of trust, is basic to feelings of ontological security (1997: 92; emphasis added).

Let us address these emphasised passages in turn, in so doing illuminating what should be understood as two separate kinds of ontological insecurity. First, since ontology is the study of *what there is*, a feeling of security in this regards is a feeling that one has a sure idea about what the environment of human agency is and what it contains. We would readily associate surety with fixity; to know what there is it helps that it does not constantly change; and so Giddens associates ontological security here with ‘the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action’ (ibid). In this first sense, as a relation to one’s environment, ontological insecurity is, as Giddens states, a matter of ‘being-in-the-world’ (1997: 92).

Giddens extends this notion of ontological in/security – rightly – to intersubjective relations; ‘rightly’ because this is indeed a – perhaps the most fundamental – site of ontological insecurity. Returning to the passage above, Giddens talks here of ‘the reliability of persons’ as constitutive of ontological security. In fact, he talks of ‘the reliability of persons *and things*’ (emphasis added) as constitutive of ontological security, ontological in/security being a matter of ‘being-in-the-world’. The problem here is that Giddens seems to too readily conflate people with things in his picture of ‘being-in-the-world’; people are not like hammers or tables or whatever, and our sense of security or insecurity with regards the former ought to be distinct from that with the latter. It is inconvenient when a hammer breaks; our experience with others are (or at least ought to be) of a less instrumental order. What Giddens ought to be making



distinct here is that our feelings of ontological in/security with regards other persons are in a separate order of 'being-with-others' (-in-the-world, obviously). As it is, his notion of ontological security is in fact a matter of mere 'being-alongside-others', rather than '-with-others' in an ethical sense.

To say that Giddens' notion of ontological security as 'the reliability of persons', the stability of the intersubjective scene, is a case of 'being-alongside-others' is to say that *it is not properly intersubjective at all*. His notion of trust, which encapsulates the reliability and 'conviction of reality', purportedly 'forms a generalised component of the intersubjective nature of social life' (1991: 51). In fact, Giddens' formulation would reinforce the egoism of the 'I', postulating stability, security, and constancy as 'good' for the individual. Certainly, it is possible to argue that these are 'good' for the 'I', being as they are a source of sameness. Ontological security is the perpetuation of the same. For Giddens, a breakdown in 'trust in the other' (ibid: 98) leads to a negative feeling of insecurity; such a breakdown, we are told, leads to 'a flooding-in of existential anxiety that takes the form of feelings of hurt, puzzlement, and betrayal, together with suspicion and hostility' (ibid). Ontological insecurity, for Giddens, is the unwelcome imposition of the other into the same.

Quite the reverse, what I want to suggest is that the 'suspension of trust in the other', as Giddens puts it, is, in fact, the very essence of intersubjective relations. Our encounter with the other is always an encounter with the unknowable, with something we cannot rely on. If we could know the other then the other would not remain other; and we cannot rely on the other when we cannot know the other. What we have been leading up to here, then, is a reformulation of ontological in/security. Or, rather, what I want to suggest is a reversal of Giddens' polarity in this respect. Ontological insecurity should be understood as an encounter with the other as other. This feeling of insecurity derives from the incomprehensible nature of the other. More than just a feeling, though, this insecurity is at the very heart of intersubjectivity. The encounter with the other draws the 'I' out of its secure egoism; the hypostasis of the 'I' is shattered as the 'I' is drawn towards the other. What could be a greater cause of insecurity than this decentering of the self, this movement from solipsistic egoism to intersubjective encounter? The other as exteriority is a resistance to the power of the 'I'; we come up against the other,

encounter others as a limit to our freedom: again, what could arouse a greater sense of insecurity? And yet this ontological insecurity is the very nature of intersubjective relations; it is the fundamental state of 'being-for-others' or 'being-towards-others'. Without the insecurity of the divestment of the 'I', without the movement from stability towards the unknown of the other, there is no intersubjective dimension to encounters, only mere 'being-alongside-others'. What we see, then, is that ontological insecurity is the very condition of the ethical.

If ontological insecurity becomes 'being-for-others' then, with the reversal of Giddens' poles, ontological security becomes evasion of the other. The pursuit of ontological security becomes denial of the obligation to the other, a dereliction of one's duty to the other. So: where for Giddens ontological insecurity was, in its extreme, the state of the schizophrenic, it is here the condition of intersubjectivity as a fundamentally ethical state. Where ontological security was a necessary condition for the dread-free existence of the individual in an intersubjective realm, it is here a pathological denial of the other – or, moral spasticity. So, we see that responding morally to the other is ontologically insecure because the other is unknowable and how to respond, along with its consequences, is so too. But further to this, we see that maintaining security in the face of this is to be merely *alongside* others and not *for* others. Indeed, it is encountering the other and responding without guidance that is moral – ethics in the face of a repulsive other.

So, Engels' observation of both 'forting up' and indifference to others can be explained in these terms: we seek to make our environment secure – through gating, online or offline, as a form of selective disassociation – because the other is repulsive. The radical conclusion to be drawn is that we find proximity to the other repulsive precisely because it is in encountering others that our moral responsibility is made apparent. This is why indifference and suffering occupy the same space; moral responsibility requires facing up to this repulsion which is difficult but precisely the sort of selfless humility that moral behaviour is made of. None of which is to moralise but to theorise: by acknowledging this repulsion we can better explain the way we behave towards others today.

Each chapter of the present work has had its own immediate conclusion and it has not been my intention to reproduce these here. Instead, I have attempted to reflect on the time/space of the new media age, a picture drawn from the work in these chapters, in order to make some contributions to the future of ethical theory. First, through reiterating the importance of time to ethical theory, I have argued that new media environments allow individuals to remain stuck in a safe present, where future encounters can be avoided, and/or to neutralise the mystery of future encounters such that they need not confront the radically new of the future that constitutes the encounter; and that the individual's ability to respond to the other is disrupted by the mixing of tenses in the presentation of media events. We can say that there is a repulsion of the future. Second, I have argued that the time-saving of development shapes the new media environments we interact in, without concern for the impact upon moral behaviour between people or for the moral problems it creates more generally, such that ethical theory can ill-afford to operate from the assumption that such environments are neutral or no different from offline environments. Finally, by reflecting on the use of new media in gated spaces and the online gating of new media environments, I have argued that we should recast Levinas' other – as a 'monstrous' figure for whom we are nevertheless still responsible – and reverse the present understanding of ontological in/security in order to understand our present repulsion to proximity. We find proximity to the other repulsive which can motivate a moral spasticity that takes the form of selective disassociation. All of which takes us a long way from the account of avatar ethics in which I argued that ethical encounters take place online through avatars. This is no less tenable but we have to acknowledge that this holds only in ideal conditions; in reality, those environments in which such encounters should take place can confuse the encounter, exploit it, or actively discourage it. It is also the case that the greater control that new media allow for the individual has brought to the fore certain dispositions or ways of being that can be pandered to as never before. These I have called repulsions, of the future and of proximity, and they amount to a phobia towards the other – who has the unsettling nature of evoking one's responsibility. Where such dispositions are allowed to prevail we have a serious moral problem.

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