

MySpace Friends and the Kingdom of Ends

Kalynne Hackney Pudner
Auburn University

Robert Kunzman has argued for an approach to ethical education built on what he terms “thick” respect, requiring as full an understanding as possible of others’ ethical frameworks as these arise from each person’s particular narrative.¹ I agree with Kunzman that respect for persons demands an appreciation not only of their dignity as equal members of humanity, what might be called “thin” or universal respect, but also of their individual particularity. It is thus thick respect that is morally obligatory, and ethical education should have it within its purview. But the aim of this paper is not to debate the relative merits of respect-based versus other approaches to ethical education. I wish, instead, to examine a contemporary cultural practice I call “e-socialization,” and consider its implications for the exercise of thick respect.

Respect can be defined as a responsive attitude toward someone or something; it is a transitive concept, requiring an object. Among possible objects, we respect other persons just because human beings are the kind of thing that calls for such a responsive attitude. Robin Dillon finds four distinct but related components of respect: attention, deference, valuing, and appropriate conduct.² Respect is directed to the other as he or she really is, what we might call his or her quiddity or “whatness,” and in a human being quiddity has two senses: the universal, or what-it-is-to-be a human being generally, and the particular, or what-it-is-to-be *this* individual human being. Because part of what it is to be a human being generally is just to be an individual instantiation of humanity, thick respect, which responds to particular individuation, is ethically appropriate.

In Kantian terms, we are morally obliged to view other persons as *noumena* — rational authors of choice and action — instead of *phenomena* that are part of the world’s “furniture.”³ This account not only grounds thin respect, but suggests grounds for thick respect, as active choosers can be individuated according to the objects of their particular choices.

That respect entails the attitude of deference suggests it is the individual’s particular identity as self-defined by that individual that specifies particularity. We defer not only to the substance of the other’s description, but to which features the other chooses as important to describe. According to Kunzman, it is the other’s ethical framework, informed by a particular, organic personal narrative, and communicative of what he or she has determined to be worthwhile in pursuing life projects, that focuses thick respect: “[I]f we claim to know where we stand on matters of importance to us, we have an ethical framework, and this framework helps us shape our sense of identity.”⁴

On Kunzman’s account, thick respect requires *understanding* the other’s ethical framework, and there are two distinct aspects to this claim. First, he says, the amount

of effort that ought to be expended in this regard varies according to the depth of interaction. Thin, or universal-to-humans, respect is a given; but beyond that,

the requirements of respect...described in terms of project recognition exist on a continuum, determined by social context. Ordinary, low-stake interactions with strangers, such as paying for groceries or sharing a park bench, do not carry extensive requirements of respect and thus deeper understanding.⁵

What distinguishes “ordinary, low-stake” interactions from weightier, more significant ones? Or put another way, what scale marks the continuum of the understanding requirement? It seems it is precisely the particularity to which the understanding requirement responds: the more important the other’s particular, irreplaceable identity is to the interaction, the “thicker” the respect and thus more thorough the understanding should be. A fellow body on a park bench is just that — a body, and any other body will do just as well in its place. A different cashier at the grocery store, similarly, will not normally change the essence of that interaction. This is why an understanding of their ethical frameworks is supererogatory. But a student seeking help on a paper and a family member facing a pivotal decision are highly particular to the interaction, and thus understanding their particular ethical frameworks carries more normative force.

The question of normativity brings us to a second interesting aspect of Kunzman’s account of the understanding requirement. What, exactly, is the agent’s obligation in the interest of understanding another’s ethical framework? It is certainly not to adopt or even condone it, because that would be to trade the basis for the agent’s own thick respect for that of another, in a sense “disowning” his or her own personal narrative. Kunzman notes that “[r]espect need not be recognized as such by its recipient,” and this may be the case when his ethical framework is considered but then rejected.⁶ Some frameworks may be so foreign and unfamiliar as to preclude real understanding in any event. And if it is likely, especially in the case of conflict, that the other might not recognize understanding when it is offered, then understanding may be in principle impossible to verify. As much as we want to require actual understanding of the other’s ethical framework, it seems all that can be required is a good faith effort. The agent must exercise due care to understand, to listen sympathetically and imaginatively engage the other’s first-person perspective. If one is really making a good faith effort, he or she will attain as much understanding as is possible under the circumstances, which is the same absolute understanding attained were he or she obliged to execute actual understanding. This is so because the good faith effort is as far as the agent’s control extends, and it is unreasonable to insist on an “ought” that exceeds the limits of “can.”⁷

The depth and breadth of first-person disclosure to which the respecting agent can apply his or her good faith efforts, though, is dramatically increased through the widespread practice of computer-mediated communication (CMC), the combination of various forms of which I call e-socialization.⁸ According to a February, 2006, report of the Pew Internet and American Life Project (PIP), 87 percent of American youth between the ages of 12 and 17, more than 21 million strong, use the Internet; 73 percent of these use it more than twice per week.⁹ The vast majority of this usage

is invested in relationships with their peers. Media of e-socialization range from the specifically directed communications of cell phone text messaging and e-mail, to presumably but not guaranteed specifically directed instant messaging (IM), to broadcast blogs and personal website commentary, to anonymous engagement in massive multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs), and the features of the CMC vary accordingly.

We might call computer-mediated communication that occurs between parties that are particular (that is, personally intended) and identified as “Type I.” In Type I CMC, the sender and the receiver know who each other are, barring deliberate fraud, and each intends to communicate with that particular, identified other. Type I includes text messaging between cell phones with identified numbers and email between identified accounts. It would also include site messaging between people whose site names are candidly labeled, as this is equivalent to email restricted to users of the same host site.

Type II CMC includes that between particular but unidentified others, such as IM and chat, where users adopt screen names that typically fail to correspond to their real names. Private messaging between players in the context of an MMORPG falls into this category as well. The sender intends to disclose information to a particular other, although the offline identity of that other may be unknown or dubious.

The most common incidence of Type III CMC is what many call “broadcast” from an identified party to nonparticular others (which, because they are nonparticular, may be identified or unidentified, although the distinction would be brought to the sender’s attention only when she gets a response). Personal website profiles, such as those on MySpace or Xanga or Live Journal, plus the blogs and bulletins that are disseminated through these and other sites, are Type III. Especially as it occurs on category-based forums, such as those hosted by MMORPGs, Type III CMC frequently gives rise to Type II, or even Type I.

Finally, Type IV refers to communication between an unidentified party to particular unidentified others (MMORPG action speech, public chat, site profile commentary), or to nonspecific unidentified others (anonymous posts or blogs). A peculiar but important instance of Type IV CMC is group communication, in which a single online persona is directed by a sender group, or the messages sent to a single online persona are being received by a group, either of which may or may not be known to the other party; research indicates that this is a fairly common practice among adolescents.¹⁰

While we can sense the particularity of the “e-socializers” growing more amorphous as CMC moves from Type I to Type IV, there is a second level of permutation that clouds matters even further. This concerns the offline relationship between sender and receiver. Sometimes the interacting parties are known to each other offline, sometimes not; sometimes they believe they are known but are not, and sometimes they believe they are unknown but one in fact is known by the other. It may further be the case that neither, or either, or perhaps both, recognize which permutation best represents their relationship and may alter the tone and content of the interaction accordingly.

Regardless of CMC type or the (known or unknown) offline relationship between participants, e-socialization is touted to have a number of advantages over more traditional means, such as face-to-face, telephone, or paper-written communication. The 2001 PIP report, "Teenage Life Online: The Rise of the Instant-Message Generation and the Internet's Impact on Friendships and Family Relationships," summarizes its findings this way:

Many American youth say that Internet communication, especially instant messaging, has become an essential feature of their social lives. For them, face-to-face interaction and some telephone conversations have been partially replaced with email and instant message communication. Relationships that once might have withered are now nourished by the ease and speed of instant message exchanges and email messages. Romantic relationships are begun and ended online. Difficult conversations with friends are now mediated by the emotional distance the Internet provides. Intimate conversations sometimes seem easier than those that take place face-to-face. Teens say this can be very helpful, especially in otherwise awkward situations or at times when they are too shy to speak.¹¹

The first, and perhaps most obvious advantage of e-socialization is release from constraints of time and location. Sender and receiver can be literally on opposite sides of the globe, and they need not be online simultaneously: IM and chat excepted, communication takes place by submitting a message that is to be viewed at some (much or less) later point.

Second, even real-time CMC inserts a "space" or buffer between sender and receiver, what the PIP report calls "emotional distance." This space allows disclosure that is more reflective, open, and forthright. (Of course, it also allows disclosure that is rude, tactless, or malicious; though this is not generally considered an advantage, some users fully avail themselves of the opportunity.¹²) There is time to consider before hitting "enter," and more importantly, there is no confrontation by the recipient's immediate reaction. This absence of immediate reaction has at least two implications: first, the sender can bracket the receiver entirely, and engage in a candid soliloquy; second, the sender can imagine the receiver's reaction in whatever way she chooses, thereby abdicating responsibility for whatever the actual reaction might be, especially if it is an unpleasant one. Not having to face the possibility of immediate and undeniable rejection, moreover, makes it easier to initiate communication and thereby relationships, especially for those who are naturally shy.

Third, both sender and receiver have tremendous degrees of control over the substance and tone of the communication. The sender can fashion her image and disclosure in any way she chooses, often customizing these to the real or imagined receiver of the moment; likewise, the receiver can interpret the disclosure in whatever (presumably, though not necessarily, logically consistent) way he chooses. The motivation and direction of disclosure control spirals, as the sender is aware of the receiver's interpretive discretion and incorporates this awareness into her disclosures. The range of available nuance, in both sending and receiving, thus expands to meet any set of communicative intentions and desires. In short, e-socialization can be whatever either party wants it to be, without much reference to what the other party wants it to be.

But these same features present significant drawbacks, and even dangers, to the practice of e-socialization. The lack of constraint in both fashioning one's own and

interpreting another's disclosure raises the likelihood that the sender and receiver are engaging in parallel soliloquy instead of communication. At the very least, the inherent tonelessness of CMC significantly raises the probability of misunderstanding (as can be attested by anyone who has ever had unintentional conflict arise from an email exchange gone awry). The messages of e-socialization are therefore subject to indeterminacy.

More radical than misidentifying the message, though, is the possibility of misidentifying the sender, or the receiver, or both. I call this phenomenon "identity indeterminacy," and its implications for the exercise of thick respect go far beyond the confusion and embarrassment of not talking to the person one thinks one is. And it is constitutional to e-socialization. Even in Types I and II CMC, it is generally impossible to guarantee that the person one assumes is on the other side of the exchange is in fact that person. (How hard is it to use someone else's cell phone, for example, or to read and reply to email automatically downloaded by Outlook Express?) In other forms of e-socialization, identity indeterminacy is the rule, rather than the exception: as far back as 2001, nearly a quarter of all teens who have used IM and chat reported having deliberately pretended to be someone else while doing so.¹³ We might assume that non-deliberate misrepresentation adds substantially to this number.¹⁴

The identity indeterminacy of e-socialization extends even further, undermining the assumption of the one-to-one correspondence definitional to the concept of identity. A majority of online teens maintain more than one electronic identity, and though it is less common, some identities are shared accounts, serving as a single persona for more than one person. Thus one offline person may be multiple online persons, while one online person may be multiple offline persons.

Just as in the case of message indeterminacy, identity indeterminacy colors the disclosure (though it seems many adolescents ignore the possibility of indeterminacy in practice even as they acknowledge it in theory). Where the sender does have reason to suspect that the receiver is someone other than the person she thinks, or that his attitude toward her is not entirely of good will, or that he is not alone when reception takes place, or that he is likely to copy and forward her communication to another party who may or may not know her, her disclosure will be measured or deliberately obscure. Identity indeterminacy thus exacerbates message indeterminacy; and decoding, much less understanding, her ethical framework becomes nothing short of a mystery.

It is a mystery with clues, of course, some of which are contained in the very image she has chosen to project and the style of communication she has chosen to employ. These may not accurately reflect her offline self, but her choice of them *ipso facto* reveals something about her ethical framework; using that particular projection and style is something she determined that she ought to do. Affording an e-socializer thick respect, then, entails the effort to understand not only her ethical framework as a real flesh-and-blood, identity-determined person, but also her framework online (times however many online identities she maintains), as well as how these frameworks relate to each other. Such an understanding requirement may

be daunting even for educational or psychological professionals; the typical online adolescent does not stand much of a chance.

So e-socialization, despite offering abundant disclosure relevant to ethical framework understanding, raises significant challenges to that understanding along the lines of proposing an “ought” that outstrips “can.” It also raises significant challenges to the project of thick respect on a more fundamental level, by undermining particularity. Remember that the ethical normativity of thick respect is commensurate with the importance of particularity in a given interaction. If particularity turns out to be inconsequential to e-socialization, then thick respect is not morally obligatory, and efforts to understand the other’s ethical framework are unnecessary — or may even constitute disrespectful acts of nosiness or voyeurism.

To illustrate, let me posit the standard parental horror story: A teenage girl, call her Jill, has been for a period of three months e-socializing with Jack, a teenage boy in the next town. Jack initiated the relationship by requesting friend status on Jill’s MySpace, and when Jill asked in a response message whether she knew him, Jack replied with a compliment on her profile picture and the assertion that they have mutual friends (a claim Jill was able to verify by reference to both of their Friends pages). Jack and Jill are clearly compatible, and their Type II, then Type I exchanges cover topics progressively more serious and personal. They both hurry online each day in hopes of finding the other waiting, as each genuinely enjoys and values their interactions. Jack is highly attentive to Jill’s disclosures, investing considerable effort toward discerning and understanding her ethical framework (as well as other details of her life). Although to a lesser extent, Jill reciprocates his understanding. Their relationship thus corresponds closely to generally accepted accounts of mutual respect. Eventually, Jack texts Jill asking her to meet him at a football game between their respective high schools. Jill agrees (after all, her friends and her football team are going to be there), and at the appointed time and place she discovers, to her shock and horror, that “Jack” is fifty-something, balding, and missing at least two teeth. He confesses that his name is really Eugene, not Jack, and he is admittedly older than 16, but otherwise (he insists) he has been completely sincere with her.

Let’s assume that Jill extricates herself from the situation without bodily harm, and instead consider the following questions: With whom has Jill been e-socializing these months, Jack or Eugene? Is their relationship properly understood as one of mutual respect, as it appeared to be prior to Eugene’s revelation? Jack’s and Eugene’s ethical frameworks, at least online, are presumably the same. Their personal narratives are the same, at least insofar as Jack’s is a subset of Eugene’s. Their physical bodies are the same. Yet it seems an egregious stretch to say that Jill has been having a relationship with Eugene; not only had she no idea he existed, but it is almost certain she would have refused to participate in the relationship if she had.

On the other hand, if Jack is not Eugene, who is he? We might say he is nobody, but only a fiction, in which case Jill was not really in a relationship at all. This belies her self-reported experience, and thus we fail to show her the deference respect demands if we contradict her. So we might say he is anybody, that Jill’s relationship

would have been the same one no matter who turned out to be running the Jack “script.” For that matter, the script could have been run by an automated program (a “bot”) and not even a human being.¹⁵

This story highlights another implication of identity indeterminacy. In the absence of a tight connection between the e-socializer’s online and offline personae, the temptation is to apprehend others not as unique and irreplaceable particulars, or even as *noumena*, but as *phenomenal* articles of data to be managed. Relationships are declared, deepened, distanced, and dropped by a click of the mouse: putting an IM screen name on “block,” for instance, or changing “Top Friends.”¹⁶ Adding screen names to a buddy list, making and accepting friends requests to fill 9, 10, 11 Friends pages, suggests collection rather than valuation. Should some of these friends turn out to be bots instead of live people with offline identities, well, so what?

The typical teenage IM session corroborates this picture. While IM is sometimes employed deliberately as a means of particular communication (when friends are trying to make arrangements to go see a movie, for example), more often it is a solo time-filling activity. The e-socializer begins a session because it is convenient to do so then and there, and she sees who else she knows is online, any of which serves equally well as an interactional partner.¹⁷ In other words, persons in the context of Type II and higher CMC tend to be fungible, or replaceable, to each other. One college student puts it this way: “I see most of it as purely entertainment, and rarely do I take [the communication] as seriously as I do in person or over the phone.”

All of these considerations bring us back to the role of particularity in thick respect. First, particularity picks out the recipient of our thick respect. When this is in sufficiently radical doubt, as I think it must be in many forms of e-socialization, there is no object of the respect, and without an object, it is not properly called “respect” at all. Conversely, when we are more interested in managing the other or counting him or her as a member of a collection — relational attitudes that are far from respect — particularity diminishes in relevance.

Second, particularity grounds the ethical normativity of thick respect, as argued above. When particularity drops out, as is the case when e-socializers become fungible, so does the obligation of thick respect. Interestingly, it is not inconceivable that the universal humanity of e-socializers might drop out also, as in the case of the CMC being run by a bot; here even the fundamental requirement of thin respect is waived. And since there is no way to guarantee that one is communicating with a real person, much less a single real person, even less the single real person one envisions, rather than a clever software program, the inclination is toward treating partners in CMC as inanimate, digital “objects” — that is, as means only, and not ends-in-themselves.

What does all of this mean for ethical education? From the philosophical standpoint, it is not immediately clear how the standard conceptions, not only in ethics, but also in contiguous areas of philosophy like personal identity, epistemology, and philosophy of mind, can help adolescents — all of us, really — answer the question, “What ought I to do?” in the context of computer-mediated communication.

As computer-mediated communication is clearly not about to go away — and in fact, it is fast becoming the default mode of interpersonal interaction for younger generations — these standard conceptions will need to be revisited. If I am correct, the notion of thick respect, which relies on particularity for both its object and its normative ground, paradoxically seems to vanish into cyberspace just when it is needed most, to keep our quiddity as particular, individual instantiations of humanity — and not fungible, delete-able items of data — in view. From the educational standpoint, this is a view eminently worth keeping, and teaching the “Instant-Message Generation” to understand, value, and practice thick respect, especially when e-socializing, is a project worth undertaking.

1. Robert Kunzman, “Mutual Understanding: The Basis of Respect...and Ethical Education,” in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2003*, ed. Kal Alston (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2004), <http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/2003/kunzman.pdf>.

2. Robin Dillon, “Respect” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2003/entries/respect/>. Whether all, or only, humans are entitled to respect, is not settled; however, here I am concerned with central cases.

3. Christine Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), x–xii.

4. Kunzman, “Mutual Understanding,” 345.

5. *Ibid.*, 343.

6. *Ibid.*, 345.

7. Kunzman points out, rightly, that it is difficult to specify what counts as “good faith,” and that moreover, leaving the understanding requirement to be specified by the agent may result in attempts that are “utterly ill-advised and ineffective,” thus not properly considered respectful (interview by author, October 19, 2006). But it is even more difficult to justify a stricter demand under the general principle of “ought implies can.”

8. A great deal of popular and sociological literature has been, and continues to be, generated on the subject of CMC-centered relationships among adolescents. See for example: Michelle Andrews, “Decoding MySpace,” *US News and World Report* 141 (September 18, 2006): 46–60; Paris and Robert Strom, “When Teens Turn Cyberbullies,” *The Educational Forum* 70 (2005): 21–36; and Tom Zeller, Jr., “The Lives of Teenagers Now: Open Blogs, Not Locked Diaries,” *New York Times*, November 3, 2005. The most popular forum for e-socialization is MySpace (<http://www.myspace.com>), with over 100 million profiles and hundreds of thousands of new ones added each day (Andrews, “Decoding MySpace”). For a wider view of the impact of CMC on relationships, see James Katz and Ronald Rice, *Social Consequences of Internet Use: Access, Involvement and Interaction* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002), and the ongoing research reports of the Pew Internet and American Life Project at <http://www.pewinternet.org>.

9. Amanda Lenhart with the Pew Internet and American Life Project, “The Continuum Continues: A Broad Look at Barriers to Internet Access and Use among American Adolescents,” (lecture delivered at Universitat Bielefeld, Bielefeld, Germany, February 9, 2006), slides, <http://www.pewinternet.org/ppt/CyberworldBielefeld020906berlin%20rev3nn.ppt#259,4,Internet Use Basics>.

10. “Fully 83% say they have gone online with a group of others clustered around the computer and it is not uncommon for one group of teens to be instant messaging another group of teens convened at another computer.” Amanda Lenhart, Oliver Lewis, and Lee Rainie, “Teenage Life Online,” Pew Internet and American Life Project Report, http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/36/report_display.asp, 13.

11. *Ibid.*, 16.

12. Strom and Strom, “When Teens Turn Cyberbullies.”

13. Lenhart, Lewis, and Rainie, “Teenage Life Online,” 4 and 18.

14. Adolescents often introduce identity indeterminacy deliberately, if not intentionally, by sharing their passwords. According to Lenhart, Lewis, and Rainie, "Teenage Life Online," 22 percent of respondents reported having done so.

15. This is not a mere hypothetical. Many MMORPGs contain "non-player characters," or NPCs, that interact extensively with actual players, and America Online Instant Messenger recently instituted "AIMbots," or cued-response IM dialogue one user can send to another as a prank.

16. Anecdotal evidence from my local junior high school points to the growing popularity of ending a romantic relationship by quietly removing the former partner's picture from the coveted upper left corner of the MySpace "Top Friends" box.

17. Lenhart, Lewis, and Rainie, "Teenage Life Online," 20–1.

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