Plural Selves and Relational Identity

*Intimacy and Privacy Online*

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**INTRODUCTION**

With unprecedented global access, speed, and relative anonymity with respect to how one is able to present oneself to and interact with others, computer-mediated communication (hereafter CMC) contexts provide many new worlds through which we may express and develop our identities as persons and form relationships with others. Through text-based e-mail and chat-room style forums, or Web site and Web cam technology, we may present or even 'showcase' ourselves to others, and we may enter and contribute to all sorts of communities, such as hobby and mutual interest groups, and develop various sorts of relationships with others. Indeed, for many people, significant aspects of key roles and relationships in their professional, business, and even personal lives are now conducted online.

It makes sense then, to consider if these CMC contexts, where people are increasingly presenting themselves to and undertaking various activities and relationships with others, might tailor the content of these relationships and the self that is presented to others online in any notable ways. For many, opportunities to express and form relationships have been enormously increased by computer communication technology. But what sorts of identities and relationships are really possible online? How might our pursuit of values that constitute and regulate our ideals of personal identity and various significant relationships be sensitive to such communication environments?

It is clear that contextual features of the setting within which we express ourselves to others can significantly influence the content and nature of our communication. Indeed, it is clear that the nature of the relationships one is able to have and the self one is able to communicate within those relationships can be seriously affected by the context of one's
communication. Perhaps certain contextual features of the environments provided by CMC enable and promote certain valuable kinds of relationships and self-expression. On the other hand, some values might be lost, perverted, or their pursuit limited by features of these communication environments.

One well-worn question in computer ethics has concerned whether or not computers can be persons. But, given the proliferation of computer communication in our lives, it now seems worth considering the extent and ways in which persons can be persons online. The general issue concerns the normative effects CMC contexts might have on values attached to our identities and our relationships with others. The particular aspect of this general issue I explore in this chapter concerns the effects of CMC contexts on intimacy and privacy.

I have argued elsewhere (Cocking and Matthews 2000) that, despite apparent ‘real life’ phenomena to the contrary, certain features of text-based online contexts largely rule out the development of close friendships exclusively in those contexts. One obvious feature to point the finger at here is the relative anonymity afforded, say, by text-based e-mail or chat-room formats. While each person may give quite a deal of information ostensibly about themselves, whether in fact this information is accurately representative is, of course, a separate question that one is unable to verify independently. If conditions allowing such anonymity, as Glaucon’s tale of the Ring of Gyges warned us, may tempt one to immorality (much less leave one without any reason to be moral at all), then we may understandably be very wary of trusting one another under such conditions.

But, even if we put aside worries regarding deliberate deception and so forth, the bare fact of information about one another being exclusively attained under conditions that allow such anonymity may seem sufficient to sink the idea that one could develop close friendships under such conditions. How could one become the close friend of another under conditions where, so far as one can tell, that other might not even exist? The ‘other’, for instance, may simply be a character someone has created or to which any number of writers regularly contribute. Of course, one may become quite attached to such a character. We do, after all, get attached to people in real life, only to discover they were not who they seemed, and we do become attached to characters, such as Daffy Duck, that we know do not exist. However, we typically think that those to whom we became quite attached but who turn out not to be who they seemed, were not after all our close friends. And, of course, while many of us might be quite fond of Daffy, he cannot be our close friend.

1 For some detailed discussion of various ways in which I think the online communication context can affect such content, see Cocking and Matthews (2000).
In response, it might be thought that the bare fact that communication conditions might allow such anonymity should not itself rule out close friendship. We could, for instance, simply add the condition that the parties to the virtual friendship in fact are the real characters they claim to be and that their interest in one another is sincere. Thus, I may believe that my Internet buddy is my close friend and, if he does exist and his communications to me are sincere, then he may in fact be my close friend. Against such a view, however, I claim that such online contexts nevertheless seriously limit the possible scope for the development of close friendships and, in particular, the intimacy found in such relationships. Not because of the range of possibilities for deception, or on account of the bare fact of anonymity, but on account of another distortion and limitation related to the relative anonymity afforded by such online contexts.

The key feature of CMC contexts to which I draw attention concerns the atypical dominance of high levels and kinds of choice and control in how one may present and disclose oneself afforded the person communicating online – one part of which is how CMC contexts makes one less subject to the thoughts and influence of others. In various virtual contexts, such as text-based e-mail and chat-room forums, one is able, for instance, to present a far more carefully constructed picture of one’s attitudes, feelings, and of the sort of person one would choose to present oneself as than otherwise would be possible in various nonvirtual contexts.

In this chapter, I consider what effects such atypical control the individual is afforded over their own self-presentations may have for the possibility of developing the sort of intimacy found in close friendships. I also think, however, this focus is instructive and suggestive of a novel way to understand both online privacy and part of what is at stake in concern about privacy generally. For, while online contexts would seem to present a barrier to the development of intimacy, they also, at once, seem to facilitate the maintaining of a private self, insulated from the observations, judgments, and related interpretive interaction of others. Nevertheless, I will argue that the opportunity afforded online to insulate a private self from others would also seem to largely rule out certain ways of relating to one another in which we may respect one another’s privacy.

In arguing my case here, I focus on the significance of aspects of self over which we exercise less choice and control, particularly in the context where they coexist with conflicting aspects of self over which we exercise more choice and control. Much contemporary literature in moral psychology has focused on the latter in order to provide accounts of our agency, our moral responsibility, and of our moral identities. Indeed, on many such accounts, uncooperative aspects of our conduct, over which we exercise less choice and control, are presented as key illustrations of failures of agency and moral responsibility and marginalized from the story given of our moral
identities. I do not here dispute that such aspects of conduct may illustrate failures of agency or moral responsibility. I think they may or may not. One may well be morally responsible for aspects of oneself over which one now exercises little or no choice or control because one may be responsible for aspects of one’s character (e.g., one’s selfishness, kindness, or courage) that motivate the action (or omission) with respect to which one could not have now, given one’s character, exercised any choice or control to do otherwise. One thing this shows, I think, is that a highly voluntary, say, ‘at-will,’ account of our moral responsibility for actions cannot generally be right because many of our actions – namely, those actions that issue from certain aspects of our character – will need an account of our moral responsibility for our character to explain our moral responsibility for actions or omissions that have issued from such a character. And one thing that does seem clear is that such a highly voluntary view of our responsibility for character cannot be right. We cannot in any ‘at-will’ way effectively choose to be, say, a kind character.

I will, however, not pursue the question of what determines our responsibility for character here. Instead, my concern in this chapter is to reject the marginalization of certain aspects of our selves over which we are relatively passive (compared to other coexisting, uncooperative aspects of self) from the picture of our moral identities and of the evaluative phenomena relevant to worthwhile relations between people. And I want to resurrect the normative significance of such passive aspects of self, even if on a correct account of our responsibility for character, these aspects of self turned out to be features with respect to which we were not morally responsible. Because my account, then, is somewhat out of step with orthodoxy in the area, part of the burden of my discussion will be to support my view of the significance of such aspects of self and of relations with others. In making my case I will, in part, appeal to the case of certain online environments as a foil, where, as

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3 One general, standard view I have in mind here (within which there are many importantly distinct accounts) is the concept of a person limited to the view of free will and responsibility given by our identification with aspects of ourselves either through our second-order desires regarding our first-order desires or our evaluative judgments regarding the considerations that would move us to act. For the classic contemporary presentations of each of these views (respectively), see Frankfurt (1988) and Watson (1982). See also the centrality of choice and control to conceptions of unified agency thought to capture our moral identities in Korsgaard (1980) and Velleman (2000).

4 It might be thought that I beg the question here by using such terms as ‘aspects of self’ or ‘self-presentation’ – rather than, say, simply ‘conduct’ – because the question is whether or not such conduct which is not the result of high levels of choice and control should be regarded as relevant to our moral identities, ‘real’ self, or our relationships. I thank Justin Oakley for presenting this problem to me. In fact, however, I take it that it is the justificatory burden of my discussion to convince the reader that the terms ‘self-presentation’ or ‘aspects of self’ can properly apply to both conflicting aspects of conduct to which I refer.
I claim, these aspects of self may be minimized or perverted – at least, with respect to intimacy and certain relational aspects of privacy. My discussion proceeds as follows. First, I provide some ordinary cases of nonvirtual self-presentation and interaction. Here I illustrate the sort of contrast between uncooperative aspects of self that I have in mind and put the case for their significance for intimacy and aspects of privacy. Second, I develop and support the contribution of my account by building upon and contrasting it to a recent account of the value of privacy from Thomas Nagel (1998). Third, I focus more directly on the case of certain online environments and develop my view of the nature and value of intimacy and certain relational aspects of privacy. Here, I argue that standard online environments afford those communicating online an atypical dominance of self-presentations of the more highly chosen and controlled variety and that this dominance largely eliminates the sort of values regarding identity and our relations with others I have canvassed.

1. ACTIVE AND PASSIVE SELVES

The identity of most of us consists in a bundle of plural selves or, at least, plural aspects of self. Given the range of interests, relationships, and the roles most of us have, and the range of contextual circumstances within which these are expressed, an identity without such plurality would be extraordinarily limited and ineffectual and unable to properly pursue various interests and properly engage in various relationships and roles across a range of contexts. Indeed, such cross-situational plurality of self commonly requires dispositional capacities that are significantly at odds with one another. At work, for instance, it may be appropriate that one is industrious and one’s attention narrowly directed by the pursuit of quite specific goals, whereas this would be a very limiting, ineffectual, and inappropriate disposition to govern the enjoyment of values to do with relaxing at home or being with one’s friends.

Often however, plural and uncooperative aspects of self are presented within the context of one relationship, role, or encounter. Indeed, in ordinary nonvirtual contexts, such as at work or being out with friends, while I may exercise control over my self-presentations so that I do not actively present, say, my anger, competitiveness, envy, jealousy, or any other aspects of my character I am either unaware of, or would choose not to present, my more ‘active’ self-presentations need not be the most dominant, much less

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5 I give a fuller philosophical account of my rejection of what may be called the ‘reflective choice and effective control’ view of our moral identities, in an unpublished paper ‘Identity, self-presentation and interpretation: The case of hypocrisy’.

6 And sometimes, of course, our pursuit of plural values conflicts and the price of pursuing one is the cost of another – my pursuit of family life, for instance, suffers on account of the time, energy and/or temperament required for the pursuit of my working life.
the only, aspects of my behavior that are presented to others. Commonly, we communicate a lot with respect to our thoughts and feelings, through tone of voice, facial expression, and body movement that goes beyond and may well conflict with self-presentations that we might provide through, for instance, the literal meaning of the words we choose to speak or write. Such uncooperative conduct, over which one exercises less choice and control, we nevertheless also quite commonly regard as revealing of aspects of one’s self, that is, one’s attitudes, feelings, emotions, or character, and to provide fertile and appropriate grounds for interpretation of one’s self, either from others, or one’s own self-interpretation.

Thus, for instance, I notice my friend’s enthusiasm for gossip, her obsession with food, or her anxiety when her ex-partner appears on the arm of his new love. Nevertheless, her enthusiasm, obsession, or anxiety, are not the result of her exercise of high levels of choice and control, and my interpretations of her attitudes and conduct may provide appropriate considerations to guide my interaction with her. Because of such interpretations I will, for example, be more attentive to my anxious friend when her ex-partner enters the room or try to lighten up the situation with a joke or some other strategy of distraction. Similarly, I might affectionately tease her regarding her interest in gossip or obsession with food. And she might joke at her own expense on any or all these counts.

Further, her attitudes and conduct here may be quite at odds with, and undermining of, the self-presentations she does intend as a matter of greater choice and control. Thus, although I interpret her as forcing her smile and putting on a brave face when her ex-partner unexpectedly turns up, she is not, as a matter of choice and control, presenting her smile as forced or presenting herself as putting on a brave face. On the contrary, this conduct conflicts with and to some extent undermines the self-presentation she chooses and aims to make effective – namely, to appear comfortable about seeing the ex-partner on the arm of his new love. Yet, not only are my interpretive interactions not confined to the self-presentations she chooses and aims to effect, if they were so confined she may rightly think me insensitive and as failing to react to her appropriately and form appropriate reasons with respect to her, for example, to engage in the distracting small talk or to provide cover for her to leave the room discreetly.

Such interpretive interactions, therefore, seem quite proper and commonplace to the realization of the friendship relationship and the intimacy found there. In both ordinary as well as significant ways, it is upon such interpretive interaction that the standard accepted features of the intimacy found in close friendship – namely, mutual affection, the desire for shared experiences, and the disposition to benefit and promote the interests of one’s friend – are expressed. I express my affection for my friend when I playfully tease her about her food obsession; recognizing her enthusiasm for gossip leads me to notice a salacious story to pass on to her from the
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front page of a tabloid newspaper; my lightening up the situation when her expartner enters the room exhibits my concern for her welfare. In close friendship, we interpret these typically more ‘passive’ aspects of our close friend’s conduct and our interpretations have an impact on the creation of the self in friendship, the reasons that emerge in it, and on the realization of the intimacy found in the relationship.7

Similarly, the presentation of more ‘passive’ aspects of our selves often provides the object for the expression of certain relational aspects of respect for another’s privacy. For the purpose of respecting people’s claim to keep certain of their thoughts and feelings to themselves and to have some choice and control over the ‘self’ they present to us for public engagement or scrutiny we can, and often should, choose to put aside what their conflicting, less chosen and controlled self-presentations might tell us. We can leave unacknowledged or unaddressed these thoughts and feelings we present and know about one another (either in general or more specific terms) for the purpose of getting along in such social encounters and to show respect for one another’s claim to the public/private boundaries of the self we choose to present to one another. My friend’s expartner, for instance, may no longer presume to engage in the private concerns of my friend, and so her anxiety and discomfort at their encounter, while recognized, may properly be set aside by the two of them and not be subjected to (his) unwelcome attention. In this way, then, relational aspects of our respect for the privacy of others can be shown.

The dissonance between self-presentations we affect more and less actively provide ‘tells’8 in communication and understanding. When, in some more highly chosen and controlled way, we present ourselves, say, as being pleased to see our expartner with his new love, but we do so in the face of quite contrary attitudes, emotions, feelings, and so forth, we do not present ourselves as we would in the absence of such conflict. The difference in self-presentations is sourced in two ways. First, our self-directives regarding how we present ourselves have limited scope. Not all aspects of our self-presentation result as acts of highly chosen and controlled direction. For instance, my friend tries valiantly not to twitch and shuffle, but some

7 For extended accounts of the interpretive process that I think are distinctive of friendship, see Cocking and Kennett (1998, 2000) and Cocking and Matthews (2000). The genesis of my focus here on interpretation that addresses both active and passive self-presentations and the import of this to our identity and related values can be seen in the latter article. The central examples I use here arguing for the significance of the passive to our moral identities and relationships were presented at the Computing and Philosophy Conference, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, in December, 2003. I am especially indebted to Kylie Williams for our relentless discussions of the issues that have culminated in this and related work. I am also indebted to Justin Oakley, Seumas Miller, and Jeroen van den Hoven for their discussions and contributions to our ongoing related work.

8 I take the term ‘tells’ from David Mamet’s classic depiction of the conman’s art in House of Games, (Good Times Entertainment, 1987).
twitching and shuffling gets through. Second, even putting these less chosen and controlled indicators aside, within the scope of the self-presentations we can affect in more highly chosen and controlled ways, these latter self-presentations do not replicate the former self-presentations they seek to mimic. We do not, for instance, use the same facial muscles when we direct ourselves to smile as we do when we more ‘naturally’ smile, say, because we are amused by a good joke.

Moreover, the difference is often quite noticeable. My bitter colleague’s smile through gritted teeth, for example, contrasts strikingly with her smirk as she offers her condolences at the knock-back I received for my latest book manuscript. Such ‘tells’ are of course not of a piece. Sometimes it is obvious what the dissonance signifies, but often it is not. Thus, communication and understanding in this regard may be as open to confusion as it is to clear insight. (Consider, for instance, the comic – and sometimes less so – experiences most of us have had romantically on account of failures of interpretation in this regard.) Often, as in the case of my friend and her ex-partner, good reasons may drive us to project self-presentations that are at odds with how we otherwise think or feel. Thus, such self-presentations may be appropriate, polite, kind, or even obligatory. Indeed, as many social scientists, psychologists, and philosophers have noted, without the capacity to choose and control self-presentation in the face of internal conflicting forces (in situations where it is necessary that we be able to get along with one another, such as in our working lives) much joint and social action would be impossible. Civilized society, in general, would be impossible. We would be jumping the queue at the deli, undermining our colleagues, and doing much worse things whenever we had the impulse to do so. Also, however, a person’s highly chosen and controlled self-presentations may be inappropriate, pathetic, or give us the creeps – as, for example, with the self-deceived, conceited, or hypocritical.

Whether or not the dissonance between such plural and conflicting self-presentations tells us something of note, or even if it does, whether we should take note of what it tells us, depends significantly upon the context

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9 Separate neural systems are involved in governing our voluntary and involuntary facial expressions. Thus, for instance, certain stroke victims are able to laugh at a joke they find amusing but are unable to direct themselves to smile. The work of Paul Ekman in cataloguing thousands of facial ‘micro-expressions’ in his *Diogenes Project* and analysing their significance is especially substantial and fascinating. I thank Kylie Williams for bringing this work and many of the issues it raises to my attention. For some of Ekman’s work, see Ekman and Friesen (1975) and Ekman and Rosenberg (1997). What is at least minimally clear is that we can use our neural-muscular system to voluntarily suppress and control various involuntary expressions and responses, but not all, and that, in many cases, our voluntary expressions differ recognizably from relevantly similar nonvoluntary ones. It also seems clear that although some differences provide quite clear ‘tells’, the ability to recognise such differences generally, easily, and with a high level of discrimination is a fairly rare talent that is not widely shared.
of the relation or role within which we are engaged. To show this it will be helpful to consider in more detail how interpretive interaction within relational contexts may in different ways appropriately address our plural and uncooperative self-presentations and, in part, create and sustain the self. In doing so, I shall contrast this approach with other accounts of the self and of its relations with others that focus largely, or exclusively, on the more highly chosen and controlled aspects of self, and which take such self-presentations to provide the uniquely proper object of our engagement and consideration.

II. RELATIONSHIPS, SELF-PRESENTATIONS, AND INTERPRETATIONS

As I have indicated, the case of personal relations, especially friendship, allows an extremely rich and broad range of self-presentations as appropriate territory for interpretive interactions. Unlike professional relations, our close friendships are not governed by relatively narrow purposes – such as to promote health for doctors, justice for lawyers, or education for teachers. The appropriateness of interpretations regarding plural and uncooperative self-presentations in professional–client relations is thus governed by a relatively limited scope of determinate considerations. Nevertheless, within the prism provided by appropriate conceptions of particular professional–client relations, interpretive interaction addressing both active and passive self-presentations remains. If, say, I am your boss or your teacher I may notice and interpret self-presentations conflicting with those you choose to present. In so far as my interpretations here are within a plausible conception of my proper interest, understanding, or engagement with you as your boss or teacher this may be appropriate territory for my interaction with you. So, for instance, more passive indicators of my student’s demeanor may suggest she is having more serious trouble finishing her thesis than she chooses to present, and my interpretation here gives me reason to not leave her floundering and take more of an interest in how we might helpfully address the problem.

Just as well, the self-presentations that conflict with what you choose to present to me may be none of my business, be disrespectful for me to engage you with, or be relatively unimportant or irrelevant to the business at hand. When the checkout teller at the supermarket asks how my day has been, although I realize she is not likely to care either way, I need not snap: ‘what do you care!’ If my colleague is able to cooperate when he wants to compete and assert some superiority, I may still be able to work with him. When I notice the telling signs – for example, his looking away and talking up his own successes when someone concatenates me on my new book – so long as his competitive drives are under some control and not too intrusive, I can put them aside and we are able to work together.
Such examples are the territory of Thomas Nagel's recent account of how conventions of privacy, concealment, nonacknowledgement or of ‘putting aside’ various aspects of one another serve to provide a psychosocial environment that supports individual autonomy and enables civilized engagement with others (Nagel 1998, p. 4). As Nagel points out, social conventions of concealment are not just about secrecy and deception, but also reticence and nonacknowledgement. Such reticence and nonacknowledgement enable us to present ourselves for appropriate and fruitful interactions in our roles and relations with others without being overwhelmed by the influence of others or self-consciousness of our awareness of others – in particular, regarding distracting or conflicting aspects of ourselves over which we do not exercise much choice and control in presenting. We are thus not condemned or simply in receipt of unwelcome attention for aspects of ourselves we do not actively present for public engagement, and we have a valuable space within which to engage in our own imaginary and reflective worlds – enabling, for instance, relaxation, enjoyment, self-development, and understanding.

Such social and relational conventions of privacy are thought, therefore, to support individual autonomy by supporting our capacity for some choice and control over the self that we present for engagement in our relations and roles with others. And clearly, as I have suggested, civil relations with others would be impossible for most of us without some robust capacity for putting aside distracting, annoying, or undesirable aspects of one another. But while there are many cases where conventions of nonacknowledgement count toward respect for privacy, the value of our interpretive interactions regarding plural and often uncooperative self-presentations is not limited to, and would often be mischaracterized by, a singular focus on

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10 As I have indicated, on my account, the appropriateness or legitimacy of such claims needs to be understood within bounds of what might plausibly be thought (relatively) unimportant, unnecessary, or irrelevant with respect to the proper considerations governing the context of the relation or role at hand. Thus, so long as my colleague’s bitter and competitive streak is not too extreme and intrusive, I can rightly put it aside as (relatively) unimportant to most of our joint tasks. On the other hand, as I discuss in the text ahead, the legitimacy of one’s interactions with another based on certain interpretations, even where these interpretations are not welcomed by the other, may also be assessed in this way. Thus, for instance, insofar as my student’s demeanour suggests she is in more trouble with her work than she chooses to present, my interactions with her may rightly be guided by my interpretation here.

11 Similar observations by social scientists have long supported the necessity and value of such psycho-social environments. Ervin Goffman’s work (Goffman 1959) on the social and contextual frames that govern and direct what we ‘give’ and ‘give off’ (or what we actively and passively present) has been especially influential here. Like Nagel, Goffman pointed to the importance of the acknowledged information for which the person accepts responsibility and the social and relational conventions discouraging focus on what is ‘given off’, rather than ‘given’, thus supporting presentations of self for public engagement over which we can claim sufficient responsibility, that is, over which we exercise sufficient choice and control.
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nonacknowledgement and the respect for privacy shown by ‘putting aside’ aspects of self over which we exercise less choice and control.

First, when, for present purposes, I put aside my interpretation of my colleague’s competitiveness I need not think my interpretation presents irrelevant information regarding the sort of person he really is. On the contrary, I may think it provides compelling and appropriate reason to not become any more involved with him than I need. Thus, although it may be appropriate in a given context and relationship or role that I respect privacy by observing conventions of nonacknowledgement, and putting aside certain aspects of another’s conduct, this does not show that such aspects should be regarded as outside the proper domain, either of what is to counted as part of a person’s character or of the interpretations of their character upon which one’s interaction may more generally be guided. Second, although my colleague’s overly competitive streak is not too intrusive and largely irrelevant to our relationship at work, it may be appropriate that I do not focus my attention on it too greatly and engage him on it, there may just as well be circumstances within our working relationship where it is appropriate that I do so. Thus, for instance, I may need to explain, say, to my boss, why I cannot trust my colleague with early drafts of my work.

The self a person chooses to present for our engagement is an important consideration it would often be disrespectful to ignore altogether. Similarly, however, it would be disrespectful to the limitations and fragility of, say, my friend’s capacities for autonomy to ignore her anxiety and apparent desire to throw a drink in the face of her ex-partner when they unexpectedly meet. This concern for limited or fragile autonomy may be thought accommodated by the standard account of moral identity in terms of morally responsible agency and the exercise of (reflective) choice and (effective) control with respect to one’s conduct. It may be accommodated as respect for the other’s efforts in this regard, and this, it might be argued, can be evidenced by the implicit agreement of the other where she accepts such interpretive influence.

However, whether or not such interpretive influence counts as respect for such efforts, or is accepted by the person whose conduct is being interpreted, these considerations do not exhaustively answer the question as to whether or not one’s interpretations are appropriate. One’s interpretations may have been unacceptable to a person, but may nevertheless be appropriate and provide appropriate guidance in one’s interaction with them. And one’s interpretations need not evidence respect for the other’s efforts to make effective some chosen presentation of self. Indeed, as with the self-deluded or hypocritical, one’s interpretive interaction may be concerned to reject such presentations of self. Contrariwise, my inappropriate interpretations may have been acceptable to her, or be directed at supporting her more highly chosen and controlled self-presentations – as, for example, when I appeal to her vanity or her low self-esteem.
The concern then – commonly addressed in terms of respect for individual autonomy – to make effective one’s reflective choices about how to be, engage with others and live, is not only the proper concern of the individual who may then keep from our influence what they may rightly regard as their choice. It is also the proper concern of others and is often significantly realized as a relational product of one’s interpretive interactions with others. For often, what the individual may rightly regard as their choice, they simply cannot keep from our influence and, indeed, cannot realize without it. This is the situation with my interpretive interactions to the passive self-presentation of my friend (and just as well, again, with those between my friend and her expartner). By making the small talk and discreetly getting her out of the room in response to her discomfort and anxiety, I assist – perhaps crucially – her capacity to make effective her choices to put on the brave face and be civil. I (or her expartner) would not be respecting her efforts by not acknowledging or putting aside her passive self-presentations that threaten to derail how she (reasonably) chooses to present herself. We do not take the forced smiles to simply and solely represent smiles. Only the inconsiderate or inept would do that, and neither would be very helpful in respecting her efforts at self-presentation in the circumstances. Instead, her capacity to make her choices about how to present herself and engage with others is made (partly) effective and respected by our appropriate interpretive reactions to her efforts in light of the passive self-presentations we do see.

As many writers have claimed, much of the concern addressed by respect for privacy seems grounded upon the concern we have with the autonomy of persons.¹² The concern addressed by privacy, that is, to keep aspects of one’s self private that one may rightly think are one’s own business, seems significantly about allowing others some significant choice and control over how it is and to whom it is that one presents oneself. This concern however, should not be conceived as only the proper concern of the individual, who may then keep from our view and exclude from our engagement what they may rightly regard private. Rather, it is also often the proper concern of others and realized as a relational product of one’s interpretive interactions with others. For again, as with my friend and her expartner, often what the individual may rightly regard as private they simply cannot keep from our view. Both my friend and her expartner may rightly regard their discomfort and anxiety at their chance meeting – a concern with which each may no longer presume to engage. Nevertheless, they cannot, or cannot very successfully, keep what they rightly regard private from one another’s view. However, they can realize respect for one another’s privacy as a relational product of their interpretive interaction.

¹² See, for instance, Rachels (1975) and Kupfer (1987). I thank Steve Matthews for passing on these references to me.
Moreover, contrary to what is claimed in virtue of the focus solely in terms of respect for individual autonomy, this relational respect for privacy is not simply a matter of not acknowledging or setting aside conflicting or uncooperative, more passive, aspects of self that one another sees. Instead, it is a matter of appropriate interpretive reactions in light of both the active and passive self-presentations one another does see. Thus, again, my friend and her expartner do not take the forced smiles to simply and solely represent smiles and so, for example, engage in an extended encounter delving into how each other is ‘really’ going – as they might in different circumstances or if they were old friends. Instead, in reaction to seeing the discomfort in one another, they respect privacy by such things as keeping eye contact fleeting, conversing only on nonconfronting subjects, and wrapping things up fairly quickly.

I now turn to the direct consideration of certain online environments and how these communication contexts might be thought to affect the sort of intimacy and aspects of privacy I have presented. Here I argue that, although standard online communication contexts favor our more highly chosen and controlled self-presentations and, thereby, tell against developing key aspects of intimacy, they would also seem to provide significant opportunities for maintaining a ‘private’ self in one’s communication with others. At the same time, however, the favoring of such self-presentations would also seem to limit and pervert the value of privacy by largely ruling out some of the relational ways I have described in which we may respect one another’s privacy.

III. THE DOMINANCE OF HIGHLY VOLUNTARY SELF-PRESENTATIONS ONLINE

So far I have argued that, although we may exercise significant choice and control over whom we allow in and exclude in everyday nonvirtual environments, we do not altogether do so over what we present and what we are subject to, and that the latter presentations of self and interactions with others are also crucial for key features of intimacy and certain relational aspects of privacy. We may, from privacy, choose to leave aside aspects of others and exclude others from aspects of ourselves. And from intimacy, we may choose to include others and allow more ‘private’ aspects of ourselves to be taken up by them. But, either way, the normal nonvirtual communication context provides us with a wide and often conflicting or problematic range of feelings and thoughts. Both privacy and intimacy depend not only upon our being able to exercise choices and controls regarding what we present for engagement by others and what we do not; who we exclude and who we do not, but also upon aspects of ourselves over which we exercise less choice and control being available to others as the subject of interpretive interactions reflecting, for instance, respect for privacy, efforts toward intimacy or both.
In various virtual contexts, such as text-based e-mail and chat-room forums, however, there is an atypical dominance of more highly chosen and controlled possibilities for self-presentation. As I mentioned earlier, one is able, for instance, to present a more carefully constructed picture of one’s attitudes, feelings, and of the sort of person one would choose to present oneself as, than otherwise would be possible in various nonvirtual contexts. In ordinary nonvirtual contexts, such as at work or being out with friends, although I may exercise control over my self-presentations in the effort to not present, say, my anger, competitiveness, envy, jealousy, or any other aspects of my character I would choose not to present, such efforts at self-presentation need not be the most dominant, much less the only, aspects of my behavior that are presented to others. As I have described, we often communicate a lot with respect to our thoughts and feelings, through tone of voice, facial expression, and body movement that goes beyond, and may well conflict with, the more highly chosen and controlled self-presentations that we might provide through, for instance, the literal meaning of the words we speak or write.

Certainly, it is hard to see how, in standard online contexts, plural and conflicting, more and less active self-presentations can both be similarly represented and understood by others. Correspondingly, it is hard to see how we can be moved, as one often is in the nonvirtual case, in response to both the more and less active self-presentations of another. It is hard, for instance, to see how one might choose to put aside or exclude from public engagement and scrutiny another’s self-presentations and disclosures that are presented and so known to one but which are not disclosed in the other’s more highly chosen and controlled self-presentations. For, if the other gives expression online, say, to her anxiety over seeing the expartner, then she has – given such features of the communication context as being able to choose how and when, or indeed, if at all, she responds – been afforded much greater opportunity to only present herself in more highly chosen and controlled ways. It is much more likely, then, that if she has put her feelings on the table in this context, she has done so as a matter of some relatively active choice and control in how she presents herself. It is, for instance, hard to see how she could then sensibly expect the other to respect a claim not to have her feelings up for engagement or scrutiny when she has, say, written an e-mail telling them of her feelings. At least, it is hard to see how she can do so by presenting aspects of herself to the other which can and sometimes ought to be put aside without thereby making an issue of it – at least the putting aside – and so, without thereby encroaching the

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13 I do not rule out that one may communicate to others online in, say, quite unreflective and uncontrolled ways. My thought is that given the distinctive and additional opportunity to not do so, it is plausibly thought less likely in the sort of contexts and relations I have in mind – for instance, the pursuit of ‘friendship’ relations exclusively in, say, e-mail or chat-room formats.
public on to the aspects of herself, she would otherwise present passively and wish to be respected as private.

How one presents oneself and how one responds to that with which one is presented in standard online contexts would, therefore, seem able to avoid much of the lack of cooperation and the conflicts in plural self-presentations I have mentioned. My friend, for instance, had she got the news from her ex about his new love, say, by an inadvertent e-mail message, could have avoided her conflicting self-presentations altogether – perhaps she could have even convincingly sent her ‘well-wishing’. Similarly, at work, my envious colleague could avoid presentations of her envy altogether, had she congratulated me on my promotion by e-mail rather than through ‘gritted teeth’ in the staff room. By enabling an atypical dominance, with respect to one’s self-presentations, of the picture of self over which one does exercise higher levels of choice and control in presenting to others and by providing a minimization of the ways in which one is subject to the influence of those with whom one interacts, one is afforded the opportunity online to largely avoid the presentation of uncooperative passive aspects of one’s self and one’s related interaction. (Likewise, one may largely avoid the presentation of uncooperative passive aspects of self from others.)

In such ways then, online environments, rather than presenting a threat to privacy, may be thought to provide heightened opportunities to maintain a private self insulated from the interpretive interactions of others. Indeed, if online communication contexts do allow one to largely omit uncooperative, relatively passive, self-presentations from the picture of one’s identity, then, in such cases, one might think privacy is better served than it is in the nonvirtual context. If the distinctive controls over self-presentation provided online may allow, say, my friend to present those aspects of self she may rightly only want to present to her ex, then it may have been better that she was able to do so. Because her anxieties or jealousies are now no longer any of his business, it may better serve her privacy – and be better all round – that she is able to exclude her private thoughts and feelings from his view altogether. Similarly, one might claim it would often be better for the purposes of one’s, say, working relationship, that one is able to exclude one’s skin color or acne from the other’s view.

But it wouldn’t be a good thing quite generally, if, as in standard online contexts, we could switch off and (largely) exclude from view, presentations of self other than those over which we exercise high levels of choice and control. For this would confine us to a monistic conception of the self and of how one’s self-presentations can be engaged and developed in one’s relationships that would, in part, limit and pervert the nature of various valuable aspects of self and its relations with others. Unlike outward aspects of one’s ‘self’, such as one’s skin color or acne, the aspects of intimacy and privacy to which I have referred and described as grounded on more passive aspects of self, represent aspects of a person’s conduct and ways of relating, which are of positive normative significance.
First, consider privacy. As I argued above, the concern addressed by privacy is not just the proper concern of the individual who may rightly exclude us altogether. It is also relational and social in nature and value. As, for example, when dealing with your expartner, I can respect your privacy by putting aside your awkwardness. If, however, our contact is confined to online contexts, while I might not be able to violate your claim to this private self, because it may (largely) now be excluded from my view, I am not in a position to be able to show respect for such more private aspects of your self either. I can’t put aside and respect your claim to keep your own counsel on thoughts and feelings not presented to me, and I can’t have them presented to me without encroaching on your claim to keep your own counsel on your private concerns – that is, by addressing these concerns as an object of my attention.

The concern addressed by privacy in the nonvirtual case enables a pluralism regarding identity and presentations of self, and it enables the relational and social good of civilized engagement that we may respect aspects of identity and self-presentation in others by putting these considerations aside. Privacy in the virtual case is secured at the expense of this pluralism about the self and at the loss of the relational and social good of respecting the privacy of others by not acknowledging or addressing aspects of the other’s identity presented to us. This much one can glean from the accounts of Nagel and others regarding privacy. But the normative significance here is not limited to our ‘making the best of a bad lot’, whereby, because we often cannot keep what we may regard as private from another’s view, we may engage in a morally civilized practice of nonacknowledgement. If it was, then online communication contexts might quite generally serve privacy better by not putting us in the position of the more private aspects of ourselves being available to others.

What is missing from this approach, however, is a broader conception of the plural ways in which the availability of more passive aspects of self is important to how we understand and relate to others and ourselves. For the availability of such aspects of self provide important grounds, not only for how we may show respect for one another’s privacy, but also for how we may thereby be moved either toward or away from developing other normatively

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14 I am especially indebted to Kylie Williams for suggesting this problem to me regarding the respect of privacy online.

15 I do not rule out that in many specific cases it might be better that one’s ‘private’ feelings, etc. are not available to others, as, for example, where my friend hears of her expartner’s new love by an inadvertent e-mail message. This seems compatible with the claim that, as a general feature of our interactions, it would, nevertheless, not be a good idea due to the broad territory of aspects of self and interpretive interactions it would marginalise. Similarly, one may have concerns about anonymity if it were a general or quite global way in which we were to relate to others, but nevertheless think it a good thing in various specific instances.
significant aspects of sociality, such as goodwill and more intimate relations with another.

As I have indicated, in the nonvirtual case we present various aspects of ourselves other than what we more actively present, say, for the purposes of our working relationship. We may have a cordial and well-functioning work relationship with another, whom we nevertheless see as racked by bitterness and a lack of generosity toward the efforts of his colleagues. And, so long as this does not intrude too greatly upon our work relationship, I need not address these thoughts and feelings. I need not make them my business. On the other hand, I may make them my business in the sense that these considerations may well provide my reasons for having little interest in pursuing the relationship beyond our working lives together. I might respect their private thoughts and feelings as private, but these aspects of the other's character might also be my reasons for not pursuing more intimate relations with them. Thus, the availability of more passive aspects of self may be crucial to the development of such relations with another.

On the other hand, and just as well, most of us do manage to make a few friends amongst, say, our work colleagues. And an important avenue for the development of more intimate relations here are the more passive aspects of the other that do attract us. So, for instance, although I may respect my colleague’s privacy and not make an issue out of the distress they are obviously going through on account of their relationship break-up, their distress may be the object of my developing concern and some affection for them. Similarly, though perhaps less morally admirable, other, more passive, features I notice, such as my colleague’s wandering eye with women, may spark a developing affection and the development of more intimate relations between us. I need not present such interpretations to my colleague in too confrontational a way. I may leave room for such observations, and aspects of his conduct can be put aside. But presented, say, with some amusement and shared interest, my interpretive influence may spark more awareness and acceptance of his conduct by him, so that, for instance, with me he does not try to hide his wandering eye so much. Thus, he might take to my amusement, where previously he would deny identification with the trait. In such everyday ways, his character, in part, is shaped by, and a relational feature of, our developing friendship and the focus of our interaction is based on, and so requires the availability of aspects of self over which one does not exercise high levels of choice and control and which may well be uncooperative with those aspects of self over which one does exercise more active choice and control.

Our nonvirtual context of communication, then, enables plural self-presentations, the availability of which, in turn, enables a balancing act regarding who we let in and exclude. Contrarily, because it is hard to see how such plural, uncooperative self-presentations may be made available in, say, text-based e-mail or chat-room formats, these online environments
would seem to force a choice between self-presentations – that is, where we either make the private unavailable altogether and rule out intimate interaction with respect to the private, or we make the private public in an attempt to establish intimacy primarily on the basis of one’s own highly controlled and chosen self-disclosures.

Thus, there seems a distortion and loss of valuable aspects of a person’s character and of the relational self ordinarily developed through those interactions which are weakened or eliminated by the dominance of more highly chosen and controlled forms of self-presentation and disclosure found in the virtual world. Moreover, these distortions and omissions are of important aspects of the self that provide much of the proper focus, not only of our interest and concern in nonvirtual friendships, but also of our understanding of others quite generally. Not only is it proper interaction between close friends that conduct or character traits, such as a wandering eye or competitive streak, are highlighted, interpreted, and may be transformed within friendship. It is also quite commonplace and proper that, say, my colleague’s passive expression of his overly competitive streak provides me with reason not to move toward developing a more intimate relationship with him.

CONCLUSION

In summary, I have used the case of certain online environments as something of a ‘real life’ foil, in order to argue for the importance of certain aspects of self and of our relations with others, which seem minimized or largely eliminable within these environments. The aspects of self I have focused on concern those over which we exercise less choice and control in presenting, and I have focused on such attitudes or conduct especially in the context of their being uncooperative with other aspects of self over which we do exercise more choice and control. My claim has been that these plural, and often uncooperative, aspects of self we nevertheless commonly regard as indicative of the character, including the moral character, of persons and as providing relevant grounds for our interpretive interaction with one another. On the basis of my arguments in support of this claim, I have tried to show some of the inadequacies both of the pursuit of identity and relations with others in standard online contexts and the limitations of some contemporary moral psychological accounts of the nature of our moral identities and our interpretive interaction with one another.

References

Plural Selves and Relational Identity