# Computer Ethics and Neoplatonic Virtue:
## A Reconsideration of Cyberethics in the Light of Plotinus' Ethical Theory

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## ABSTRACT

*In normative ethical theory, computer ethics belongs to the area of applied ethics dealing with practical and everyday moral problems arising from the use of computers and computer networks in the information society. Modern scholarship usually approves deontological and utilitarian ethics as appropriate to computer ethics, while classical theories of ethics, such as virtue ethics, are usually neglected as anachronistic and unsuitable to the information era and ICT industry. During past decades, an Aristotelian form of virtue ethics has been revived in modern philosophical enquiries with serious attempts for application to computer ethics and cyberethics. In this paper, the author argues that current trends and behaviours in online communication require an ethics of self-care found in Plotinus' self-centred virtue ethics theory. The paper supports the position that Plotinus' virtue ethics of intellectual autonomy and self-determination is relevant to cyberethics discussions involved in computer education and online communication.*

*Keywords:    Computer Ethics, Cyberethics, Intellectual Autonomy, Neoplatonism, Plotinus, Self-Determination, Virtue Ethics*

## INTRODUCTION

In online communication (i.e., online chat rooms, internet blogs, forums and social networks), a new tension arises between our *bodily existence* and our *online existence* (Capurro & Pingel, 2002). As Sherry Turkle states in her book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, in the computer-mediated worlds "the self is multiple, fluid, and constituted in interaction with machine connections" (Turkle, 1995, p. 15). The network user is aloof; divided in a psychodynamic plurality of digital identities; both *alienated* from the physical world and *connected* in the digital realm of cyberspace and cybertime. According to Taylor, "the moment you enter a virtual environment you immediately have at least two bodies: a corporeal and a digital one" (Taylor, 1999, p. 439). The *digital self* is dispersed in a hybrid state of being; it experiences an individuation of multiple digital identities; a multi-divergency of digital existence that fragments the self-unifying psychic subject in various representations (Stanovsky, 2004).

In the digital realm of online communication, traditional ethical questions are reconsid-

ered and new *aporias* arise concerning moral standards for human behavior. According to Forester and Morrison (1994), the three ethical theories of most likely relevance to computer ethics are ethical relativism, utilitarianism and consequentialism (p. 15). It has been supported that classical theories of ethics, such as virtue ethics, are worth knowing, since they provide a useful philosophical background, but, "they have limited relevance to everyday behavior in the IT industry" (Forester & Morrison, 1994, p. 14). However, virtue ethics has been revived in modern philosophical discussions; particularly after the work of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, with some serious attempts for application to computer ethics and cyberethics (Moor, 1998; Coleman, 2001; Grodzinsky, 2001; Hermanns, 2007). Computer ethicists usually emphasize the Aristotelian form of virtue ethics. Moor (1998) maintained that Aristotle's virtue ethics may help us deal with the problem of the "ethics gap" and computer sprawl.

Virtue ethics is also relevant to the ontology of online communication and virtual reality. As Rafael Capurro maintains *being digital* brings forth a new kind of *digital ontology* with ethical and metaphysical implications (Capurro, 2001). In the world of online communication, the moral agent "should be guided more by an *ethics of care* and less by *utilitarian* and/or *deontological* premises that may lead either to a purely instrumental or moralist view" (Capurro & Pingel, 2002, p. 194). It is such an *ethics of care*, or more precisely an ethic of *self-care*, that is found in Neoplatonic virtue and particularly in Plotinus' self-centered virtue ethics theory.

In this paper, I shall argue that current trends and behaviors in online communication require a self-centered virtue ethics standpoint. Plotinus' virtue ethics offers a *self-centred moral theory* (Dillon, 1996; Eliasson, 2008; Plass, 1982; Remes, 2006; Smith, 1999; Stern-Gillet, 2009). I support the position that Plotinus' virtue ethics of *intellectual autonomy* and *self-determination* is relevant to cyberethics and, particularly, the character-based moral act of moral selfhood applicable in computer education and 'netizenship'.

## Ethical Theories in Computing

Computer ethics is related to the systematic study of the ethical and social impact of computers and computer networks in the information society (Bynum, 2001; Johnson, 2001; Stamatellos, 2007; Tavani, 2007). In contemporary normative ethical theory, computer ethics belongs to the area of applied ethics dealing with practical and everyday moral issues. It is usually claimed that computer ethics involves discussions on the moral principles that help the individual to make the right decision and act responsibly on a specific ethical problem: *how we ought or ought not to act in a particular case*.

The first systematical treatment of the term 'computer ethics' can be found in James Moor's article 'What is Computer Ethics?' (1985). For Moor, an ethical use of computer technology entails an analysis of both the formulation and the justification of social, legal and professional policies. What *should we do* in cases where existing policies are inadequate to offer an answer to new problems addressed by the information society? Moor points out an important issue: in computer ethics we are confronted with moral decisions both as individuals and as a society as a whole; computer ethics includes consideration of both personal and social policies for the ethical use of computer technology.

Moreover, computer ethics is considered to be dealing with practical questions focusing on moral action: *how do I know whether an action is morally right or wrong?* This question involves two interrelated factors: the moral action and the moral agent. Herman Tavani (2007) correctly identifies four different kinds of ethical theories relevant to computer ethics decision-making procedures (pp. 47-67): (1) consequence-based (utilitarian); (2) duty-based (deontological); (3) contract-based (rights-based); (4) character-based (virtue-based).

A consequence-based or utilitarian ethics promotes personal happiness and social utility by focusing on the consequences of moral action. The philosophers who introduced a consequence-based ethical theory were Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John S. Mill (1806-

1873) while it was further developed in the works of G. E. Moore (1873-1958) and Kenneth Arrow (b. 1921) (Edgar, 2002). The aim of utilitarian ethics is to *maximize good for the greatest number of people*. There are different forms of utilitarianism. In act-utilitarianism the rightness or the wrongness of each moral action depends on the utility it produces with respect to other possible alternatives. In rule-utilitarianism the moral actions of the individual are evaluated in accordance with a justified moral rule. In negative utilitarianism the best action is that which produces the least overall amount of unhappiness. However, consequence-based ethics has been criticized for ignoring cases of justice in minorities and small groups.

A duty-based or deontological ethics treats the moral agents as *ends in themselves*. Only a free moral agent is able to apply good will and decide. A moral action is right only if it is performed in a *sense of duty*; independently of the consequences of the action or the preferences of the agent (Edgar, 2002). The moral agent has certain duties*: actions that we ought or ought not to perform*. The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is the first thinker who systematically maintained the main lines of a deontological position. A rational agent has to rely on the objective moral principles of a universal moral law and not on subjective moral principles or personal inclinations. A duty-based ethical perspective is grounded on *a priori* moral principles independent of arbitrary personal beliefs, cultural customs and unpredictable circumstances. Nevertheless, duty-based ethics has been criticized for underestimating the importance of personal happiness and social utility.

A contract-based ethical theory is based on the idea of social contract and the rights of the individuals. It is the view that the moral and political obligations of an individual are *dependent upon a contract or agreement between the individuals to form a society*. The social contract theory has been developed by Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), John Locke (1632-1704) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778). An individual is promoted to see its own self as 'moral by agreement'; as a self-interested agent that establishes moral codes for its own individual and social rights. However, contract-based ethical theory has been criticized as minimalist or legalistic and not as an active theory of morality.

A character-based ethical theory is based on human virtue and the development of human personality; duties, obligations, consequences and contracts are secondary in the establishment of morality and the appropriate moral choice (Edgar, 2002). Virtue ethics has its roots in Greek antiquity and particularly in the philosophy of Aristotle (384-322 BCE), who sets out his ethical theory in two influential works: the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics*. The kernel of a character-based ethics is the determination of the moral principles and standards that evaluate an ethical practice or behavior in accordance with a number of virtues. For virtue theory, freedom is a presupposition for ethics. A voluntary action has to be internal or *autonomous* (i.e., coming from the agent), rather than external or *heteronomous* (i.e., compelled by someone or something other than the agent). A virtuous moral agent is self-reflective, i.e., knows when a moral action promotes *eudaimonia* and benefits the society. However, the character-based virtue ethics theory has been criticized as referring to an old-fashioned ancient treatment that is more applicable in homogeneous communities and not in modern societies of multi-cultural diversity.

The above theories provide us with a variety of ethical principles to guide our actions and decisions. However, in modern scholarship, whereas deontological and utilitarian ethics are approved as relevant to computer ethics, virtue ethics has been neglected as anachronistic and inappropriate to the computer information era and IT industry (Forester & Morrison, 1994). In some cases, deontological and utilitarian ethics have been integrated and combined in a single theoretical framework such as John Rawls (1971) synthesis of deontology and utilitarianism and Moor's (2004) just-consequentialism theory. On the other hand, over the last decades, a revival of virtue ethics theory is offered as an alternative to normative, duty-based and consequence-based theories.

## The Revival of Virtue Ethics

Alasdair MacIntyre recommended the discussion of virtue ethics in contemporary ethical theory. His influential book *After Virtue* (first published 1981) offers a dialectic socio-historical analysis of modern moral discourse. MacIntyre criticizes the Enlightenment for fragmenting ethical practice in deterministic action-decision and failing to establish a coherent moral personal framework of thought before moral agency and action. For MacIntyre, Aristotelian virtue ethics provides new grounds for ethical establishment in the excellence of the individual in personal and public life.

Virtue ethics has also found a place in computer ethics discussions. Frances Grodzinsky in her article 'The Practitioner from Within: Revisiting the Virtues' has successfully underlined the importance of virtue ethics in the information society and particularly in education (2001). She argues that problem-solving in computer ethics cannot be strictly based on deontological or utilitarian approaches; a serious macro-ethical issue generated by computer technology at a social level needs to be primarily examined from a micro-based perspective of the individual's moral agency. Virtue ethics develops students' personal ethics. In virtue ethics education the focus is *on being rather than doing*. The students are able to develop practical wisdom and moral excellence by being self-aware of the core values that underlie a computer ethics problem. This is achieved by working on their personal identity, imagination and narrative.

Grodzinsky (2001) reevaluates the teaching methods of computer ethics courses in the ethical spirit of Aristotle and Kant. As Hermanns (2007) maintains, there are some complementarities between virtue ethics and some versions and elements of Kantianism. Virtue ethics should be approached from the point of human flourishing with reference to moral values and behaviors: virtue ethics has "one unique feature which lacks in the other major ethical methods … this feature is its central concern with an areatically and ontologically conceived ethical subject and her 'flourishing' by means of what is variously presented as the formation of virtuous 'habits' or a virtuous 'character'" (Hermanns, 2007). Moreover, Kari Gwen Coleman (2001) identifies a list of characteristics of computational agents that can be understood as virtues within a framework of Aristotelian virtue ethics. Coleman suggests that computer ethics could be conceived as a form of android ethics and the study of the morals of computational agents (2001).

On the other hand, Floridi and Sanders (2005) stated that cyberethics cannot be based on virtue ethics; virtue ethics "remains limited by its subject-oriented approach and its philosophical anthropology, it cannot provide, by itself, a satisfactory ethics for a globalised world in general and for the information society in particular." (p. 199). Alternatively, Floridi & Sanders argued for a poietically-enabling environment which enhances and requires the development of a constructionist ethics (2005). Virtue ethics is criticized for its inability to resolve conflicts among virtue; it does not take into consideration the nature and consequences of actions. Virtue ethics presupposes a homogeneous community and is not applicable to the heterogeneous contemporary societies; whereas virtue ethics applied to ancient Greek *polis*, virtue ethics practice seems to be inappropriate for the Western multi-divergent world (for a synopsis of this critic see Tavani, 2007).

However, the above criticism to virtue ethics should be reevaluated for online communication and internet communities. Internet culture tends to be more homogeneous rather than heterogeneous (Cooper, 2004). The homogeneity of cyberspace provides a common social interaction and structure between internet users. The web could be seen as a *cyberpolis* and the Internet as the *cyberagora* of the information society. Like the citizens of the ancient Greek *polis* who used the *agora* to exchange goods and ideas, the netizens of the *cyberagora* communicate in a network of cultural homogeneity. Internet cultural homogeneity encourages virtue ethics in the form of a self-referential reform of the individual vis-à-vis the multi-divergency

of social networking. Within this framework, a self-directed form of virtue ethics is relevant to online communication.

## Plotinus' Virtue Ethics

Plotinus is a philosopher who developed a self-directed virtue ethics focusing on intellectual autonomy and self-determination. His ethical theory is mainly exposed in *Enneads* I.2 *On Virtues* and I.4 *On Well-Being*. However, throughout the nine treatises of *Ennead* I, various philosophical inquiries on virtue (*aretē*) and ethics can be found with special reference to human life, well-being (*eudaimonia*) and the excellence of the wise (*spoudaios*). Plotinus' ethical theory is related to the metaphysics of goodness and human psychology; ethics is related to the excellence of character and not to duties and consequences of the agent's actions (Remes, 2006, p. 6). Plotinus' perspective of virtue ethics can be traced back to the Presocratic excellence of *aretē*, the Socratic epistemology of virtue and the post-Socratic developments of ethical theory, in Plato's metaphysics and Aristotle's ethics.

Plato's virtue ethics has a metaphysical perspective. For Plato, *eudaimonia* should be the highest aim of moral thought in harmony with the perfection of the Forms (Wright, 2009). Virtues are the prerequisite skills of character development and human excellence towards transcendent goodness and divine knowledge (the *Symposium*, the *Phaedo*, the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*). Plato's ethical theory moves from the metaphysical indications of good life (in his early dialogues), to the transcendental value of virtues in analogy to the harmony of the soul and the structure of the *polis* (in his middle dialogues), and finally, to the connection between the virtuous soul and the divine cosmic order (in his late dialogues) (Frede, 2009).

On the other hand, Aristotle's virtue ethics has a practical perspective. For Aristotle, ethics is practical philosophy dealing with the character and behavior of the individual in the community (Wright, 2009). He sets out his ethical theory in two influential works: the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Eudemian Ethics*. Aristotle primarily discriminates between *means* and *ends*: whereas means are human actions performed for the sake of something else, *ends* are human actions performed for their own sake. Aristotle's central ethical question reflects Plato's eudemonistic ethics but in a more practical perspective: what is the end (*telos*) of human life? Aristotle's answer in *Nicomachean Ethics* is that there must be an 'end for all means', and the final end of all actions has to be *eudaimonia*: i.e., the activity of the soul in accordance with reason, the highest faculty of the human mind. In order to achieve *eudaimonia*, the individual has to exercise moral virtue and moral virtue is a disposition concerning choice that is grounded on moderation, i.e. a mean between two extremes: deficiency and excess. For instance, the virtue of courage is a mean between fear and rashness. However, a moral agent is not good and happy only by choosing the right action, but also by knowing the right way to do it. Knowledge and wisdom are inseparable to the virtuous actions of a moral agent and so *eudaimonia* and *aretē* are closely related (Wright, 2009).

Plato's and Aristotle's virtue ethics are reflected in Plotinus' virtue ethics. Plotinus emphasizes the ontological and psychological elements of the self; his virtue ethics is a *self-centered moral theory* (Dillon, 1996; Eliasson, 2008; Plass, 1982; Remes, 2006; Smith, 1999; Stern-Gillet, 2009). The man of moral depth, the wise (*spoudaios*) must be self-reflective and intellectually autonomous; the one who recognizes his own knowledge and wisdom. The virtue of the wise that leads to true happiness is to exercise the higher activity of the soul's intelligible self; true *aretē* frees the wise from the lower self and so, *the virtuous man is no longer a good man but a self-sufficient god* (*Ennead* I.2.6-7). The Plotinian wise has to follow the inward self-thinking activity of the divine mind; to become intellect, the soul has to be intellectually autonomous, self-reflective and responsible for its own actions; the soul must have free will and self-knowledge to discover its true self that leads to *eudaimonia*.

For Plotinus, all virtues are forms of purifications which lead the mind to noetic ascent and pure contemplation. Plotinus follows Aristotle in accepting two kinds of virtues: intellectual and moral (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1139a ff.). Plotinus focuses on the first. Based also on Plato's metaphysics, Plotinus offers a graduation of virtues and maintains that the highest virtues are paradigms of virtues that correspond to the Forms. Virtues contribute to the noetic ascent and theoretical excellence of the soul. Plotinus considers four basic virtues (discussed in Plato's *Republic Phaedo* and the *Theatetus*): *wisdom, justice, self-control* and *courage*. In *Ennead* I.2 *On Virtues* he offers an ascending scale of virtues which has been further systematized by Porphyry in the *Sentences*: (1) civic virtues at the practical level (1.17-21); (2) purification virtues at the soul-body level (3.15-9); (3) contemplative virtues at the soul-intellect level (6.12-27); (4) paradigmatic virtues at the level of the Forms (7.3-6) (Kalligas, 1994, pp. 187-190).

Based on these virtues, human excellence can be attained not by *having* intellect but by *being* intellect. The virtuous soul is likened to the Intellect's self-thinking *eudaimonia* (*Ennead* I.4.4) (McGroarty, 2007). The soul of the wise is affected neither by suffering and misfortune nor by other external influences (*Ennead* I.4.5-9). However, the wise is not irresponsible for his body despite the fact that bodily goods will not contribute to his *eudaimonia* (I.4.11-16). Plotinus criticizes Aristotle's practical perspective of morality and good life; *eudaimonia* should not be related to proper function and the accomplishment of natural ends (*Ennead* I.4.1). Plotinus is also critical of the Stoic identification of *eudaimonia* with the soul's *apathia*; true happiness is not connected simply to discursive reason and an unconditional acceptance of the divine law of necessity (McGroarty, 2007). Plotinus also denies the Epicurean *eudaimonia* as it is related to the soul's *ataraxia* and pleasure (*Ennead* I.4.2). Both Stoics and Epicureans emphasize 'good life' and not 'well being' which is, for Plotinus, the highest good for the human soul. For Plotinus, *eudaimonia* and *aretē* are not achieved in ethical practice, but more so in pure contemplation of the true being and the noetic ascent of the soul to the intelligible realm of Nous (*Ennead* I.4.3-4).

## A Self-Directed Ethic

Plotinus' virtue ethics is a self-directed theory. The moral agent aims at self-perfection and true *aretē* (Stern-Gillet 2009); at the perfection of the soul in a self-reflective act of noetic purification, intellectual autonomy and self-determination. Plotinus' virtue ethics is differentiated from any precedent theory particularly in the use of the principle of *what depends on us* (*eph' hēmin*) (Eliasson, 2008). The radicalism of the Plotinian position could be conceived as a reaction to Roman Stoicism and its emphasis on civic duties and strict materialism (Remes, 2006, p. 6). Plotinus focuses on the self-perfection of human soul and *what depends on us*. As Eliasson states, "something depends on an agent if and only if it happens because of a wish coming about through the thought and contemplation of virtue" (Eliasson, 2008, p. 205). Plotinus further discriminates between internal determinations (what depends on us, i.e., *eph' hēmin*) and external determinations (what is not depended on us, i.e., *ouk eph' hēmin*) (Eliasson, 2008, pp. 173 ff.; Remes, 2006, p. 9). The *eph' hēmin* should *not* be a mere word (III.1.7.15); it signifies the self-determination and intellectual autonomy of the soul; the virtuous moral agent acts autonomously in *inward* determination and not in heteronymous outward actions determined by external factors and conditions (*Ennead* VI.8.6.19-23); *the best actions come from ourselves* …this is the nature we are of when alone; good and wise men do noble actions by their own will" (*Ennead* III.1.10.10).

The Plotinian self is the conscious center of awareness (Remes, 2007); self-knowledge and self-thinking are integral capacities of selfhood, while intellectual autonomy, self-governance, self-determination, self-control and self-constitution are primary activities of the self towards goodness and character-self-formation. To be virtuous, we must firstly be

virtuous persons and not just act virtuously; virtuous actions arise from the soul's inner excellence and not *vice versa*. To become virtuous is to discover our inner-wisdom and become *spoudaioi* (i.e., truly wise) and the *spoudaios cannot act wrongly* (Remes, 2006). The wise moral agent is self-determined and independent and "the Intellect is independent and virtue wishes to be independent by supervising the soul to make it good, and up to this point is free itself and makes the soul free" (*Ennead* VI.8.6.5-8). Even in the case where the moral agent faces compulsory passions and actions that are *not* under its supervision, it will keep its independence by referring back to itself.

On the other hand, Plotinus' self-directed ethics should not be understood as an 'ascetic' or 'egoistic' form of ethic (Stern-Gillet, 2009). The moral agent should not withdraw from the public sphere and deny practical wisdom and justice (Remes, 2006). The wise is not unfriendly or inconsiderate (*Ennead* I.4.15.23-25). Plotinus' virtue ethics leads to self-reformation and self-discovery: *we have to become what we are*; an act of self-reflection is not an act of selfishness but an act towards goodness. The soul's noetic ascent is a self-directed act of self-identity that leads the soul to the understanding of the others through self-knowledge (*Ennead* VI.9.11). Plotinus stresses the fact that a virtuous action must be voluntary and conscious; (1) we should not be forced to act, (2) we should know what depends on us and (3) we should be the masters of doing (Eliasson, 2008). These principles presuppose the agent's intellectual autonomy and self-determination.

## Virtue Online

According to Derek Stanovsky (2004), "it is possible to recapitulate a large portion of the history of Western metaphysics from the vantage-point offered by virtual reality" (p. 170). For Stanovsky (2004), Plotinus' metaphysics of matter is a precursor of "virtual metaphysics" (pp. 170-174). For Plotinus, the apparent actuality of the perceptibles is a reflection of the intelligibles upon matter (*Enneads* V.1.9.20-

34; IV.3.12; III.6.7-13). He portrays matter (*hylē*) as the Mirror of Dionysus; the 'mirror' which reflects the images of the intelligibles as pseudo-existences through the 'medium' of the soul. The perceptible phenomena are 'signs' of a higher intelligible reality (*Ennead* VI.9.11). The projection of the intelligibles upon matter is an illumination which does not separate them substantially from their intelligible origins nor cause any spatial or temporal division (*Ennead* III.6.13.49). Stanovsky (2004) states that Plotinus' conception closely describes the current possibilities of virtual reality; "virtual reality may be very like the images in a mirror persisting even after the mirror disappears" (p. 171).

This is also relevant to digital identities experienced by the self in the virtual reality of online society (Turkle, 1995). In cyberspace, the self experiences a hybrid state of being between physical existence and online existence. Capurro & Pingel (2002) outline three characteristics of online existence: (1) online existence involves a bodily abstraction which implies abstraction from bodily identity and individuality; (2) online existence entails abstraction from our situational orientation – an orientation which includes sharing time and space with others; (3) online existence is presence- as well as globally-oriented. In online existence digital being-with-others tends to be ghostly-oriented (Capurro & Pingel, 2002). In on-line communication and social networks, the *digital others* are not 'real' in themselves but digital representations of their selves in multiple digital identities simultaneously. The network user lives a 'dual life', partly in physical permanence of body identity and in digital variability of online communication.

For Plotinus, the human soul has a 'double life' and a 'double nature' participating in both the intelligible and the perceptible realms (*Ennead* IV.8.8.11-13). The soul occupies a 'middle rank' at the boundary between the higher intelligible world of the Forms and the lower corporeal nature of the perceptible reality; it is an 'amphibion' (*Ennead* IV.8.4.32), living and participating in both the intelligible and the perceptible worlds (*Ennead* IV.8.7.5).

Plotinus famous metaphor of the soul is that of a "double city, one above and one composed of the lower elements set in order by the powers above" (*Ennead* IV.4.17.30 ff.). The *higher self* is the source of goodness, knowledge and intelligence, while the lower self is the source of perceptible plurality and opinion.

Plotinus' ethics focuses on the *care of the higher self*; true virtue is to exercise self-care rather than care for the others (Stern-Gillet, 2009). In order to care for your self, the moral soul has to return inwards to the moral depths of your own intellectual capacity. The moral soul has to become *nous*; a self-thinking mind in pure identity of thinking and being. The self-reflective inward act of the moral soul leads to self-purification; *eudaimonia* is a free intelligible life of self-perfection (Stern-Gillet, 2009). The virtuous moral soul recognizes the need to be intellectually autonomous and self-determined; beyond heteronymous influences and external determinations.

For Roberts and Wood (2007), autonomy is an intellectual virtue that reflects the social and cultural nature of human agency; *to be autonomous is to think autonomously*; the individual has to become an independent thinker with moral depth, able to recognize not only its moral responsibilities but also its intellectual dependencies and values. The virtue of autonomy is a fulfilment of natural desire; the natural desire to know autonomously as a competent independent agent: "autonomy is a genuinely intellectual virtue only when it is supported by the love of knowledge, because knowledge is the chief and central intellectual good"; the autonomous intellectual is such "not because he is an intellectually self-made man, but because he has actively and intelligently appropriated the regulators in his noetic structure." (Roberts & Wood, 2007, p. 284).

Likewise, for Plotinus, autonomy is an intellectual virtue found in the self-reflective noetic ascent of the moral soul. Virtue is freedom for the soul; noetic ascent provides independency; the moral self is able to recognize its own freedom to decide the best by focusing on the good (Leroux, 1996). The moral soul

follows the perfect self-thinking activity of intellect which is the cause of its true knowledge. It is exactly this self-identification that the moral soul has to exercise in his intellectual autonomy. As the Intellect is the *nomos* of being (*Ennead* V.9.5.26-34), the soul has to be the *nomos* of the self. Since at the level of Intellect, self-knowledge is the supreme activity of Intelligence directed towards being, so at the level of human soul, self-knowledge is an inward activity for the soul's ascent to the intelligible world. Self-knowledge has to be the goal for the individual soul in order to be virtuous. Self-knowledge signifies the reversed positive autonomy of soul and marks the beginning of the soul's wisdom and responsibility (*Ennead* III.1.10). It is the first responsibility of the soul to think itself and exercise reason (*Ennead* I.4.7). For Plotinus, a moral self should not be conceived as a means to an end, but as the principles themselves (*archai*), "which are moved towards the noble things by their own nature and this is a self determined principle" (*Ennead* III.2.10.18-19).

In online communities, the act of self-determination is a necessary prerequisite and demand by the users. Let us take the case of privacy in social networks. Recently, various privacy breaches in Facebook have led many users to distrust Facebook and decide to select other social networks such as Studi VZ (a German social network with 16.6 million users); as Jenna Wortham noticed "unlike Facebook, Studi VZ lets its users set their own privacy settings and its Web site is not accessible to search engines like Google" (Wortham, 2010, p. 15). The act of self-determination in this case comes from the need of intellectual autonomy and by the determination of privacy and freedom by the users themselves.

Intellectual autonomy and self-determination are also important in education. As Grodzinsky (2001) observes, virtue ethics provides a character-forming self-reflection that appears to be more applicable to students than an action-guiding rule-based agency; students see "the utilitarian or the deontologist as someone other than themselves, and there seems to be very little

internalization of these action-based theories" (p. 581). A school has to educate autonomous agents who attribute their right and decision to themselves and not to extra-social authorities such as political powers and governments. As Cornelius Castoriadis has maintained, education has to contribute to peoples' political autonomy; the right to decide for themselves about their laws that actually define their own lives according to their pronouncements (Castoriadis, 2000).

For Plotinus, the autonomous moral self becomes an *example* for the others. A self-reflective act of self-governance and self-responsibility has also a global standpoint towards the others (Remes, 2006). This Plotinian moral self acts both alone and for the benefit of the others: "he will render to his friends all that he renders to himself, and so will be the best of friends as well as remaining intelligent" (*Ennead* I.4.15.23-25). Thus, Plotinus' self-centered ethics has a global horizon; it harmonizes our own selves with the world; ourselves with the others. The moral sphere is both personal and public. The Plotinian *spoudaios* is the life of a wise-soul who both returns inwards to its intelligible origins and becomes an exemplar of purification and goodness for the others. A moral soul is both a private cosmos and part of the universe; the self is part of the whole (*Ennead* II.2.2). Each soul is an "intelligible universe" (*Ennead* III.4.3) and every individual is responsible for choosing the right life to live. The wise depends on its own powers; the wise is able to exercise the *aretē* of self-control by following the path of self-knowledge and wisdom. For Plotinus, self-knowledge originates and must be based on the Intellect's self-thinking activity which "thinks itself and in itself" (*Ennead* V.9.5.14-15). The Intellect is the first and perfect law-giver of the intelligible, i.e., the *law of being* (5.28-29). Through self-realization the soul becomes universal; the virtuous soul is a paradigmatic intellect and an exemplar for the others. For Plotinus, necessity contains free-will (*Ennead* IV.8.5). The soul of the Plotinian *spoudaios* embarks on the ship of his spirit through the voyage of life; the life of the wise is dependent both on the powers of the universe and his own choices, which both have to be considered for succeeding noetic ascent and moral excellence.

## CONCLUSION

In online mediated environments the user experiences a plurality of digital identities. The self is pluralized; the psychic identity of the physical body spreads out in the divergency of online bodies and digital selves. In social networks, forums and chat-rooms, the user is both alienated from the physical others in the microcosm of the computer screen and connected to digital others in the macrocosm of the global net. In this new kind of digital ontology, the pluralized self has to be re-unified in a self-reflexive act of determination with both ethical and psychological implications. The user should be guided to return to an ethics of self-care.

Plotinus' virtue ethics follows the path of a self-centred ethics based on *our own principle of thought*; our very existence in the moral depths of our psychic noetic excellence. For Plotinus, virtue is directed internally to the self and the order of the soul and not to external duties or rules. The self-reflective activity of the soul marks its intellectual autonomy on the principle of *that which depends on us*. Virtues are primarily intellectual excellences enthroned in the higher noetic self; virtues lead to the intellectual autonomy, self-determination and the noetic freedom of the soul. Plotinus' ethical theory is not focused on what a moral agent *should do in principle*, but how the moral self *should act autonomously in noetic self-determination under no external compulsion*.

Plotinus sends us a message from the past. The moral computer user has to be virtuous not only in practical terms but also in noetic-psychic self-guidance and self-responsibility. The moral computer user has to be self-centered and self-cared; to be reunified by returning to a self-given rule of self-determination. Plotinus directs us to change our emphasis from a normative aspect of computer ethics and the bipolar social-constructive interaction between the

individual and society, to a more self-centered, psychodynamic form of the moral agency and to a character-based development of the moral self.

In the online realm of global interaction, fundamental ethical problems of privacy, security, intellectual property and equality of access have to be reconsidered in the aspect of cultural homogeneity. We as moral agents are subjects to our own decisions and actions; we have to 'turn' from mere responsibility to self-responsibility; from social heteronomy to intellectual autonomy; from the moral agency of the norms to moral self-determination of character and virtue. This 'turn' could be achieved if we 'return' to virtue ethics of intellectual autonomy that contributes to computer education and the netizenship of the new global *polis*.

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