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The “décor” is emphasized, and we’ll get to that part.

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Clark posits ethos in a complex world as a “soft self”; a contingent identity emerging from the interacting elements of a wide, continually-changing network (Natural Born Cyborgs 138). This view of the self as predicated upon a complex network of biological and non-biological constituents gives voice to the “role of context, culture, environment, and technology in the constitution of individual human persons” (Natural-Born Cyborgs 139).

Clark is challenged by Evan Selinger and Timothy Engström in “On Naturally Embodied Cyborgs: Identities, Metaphors, and Models” that this view undermines agency and thus ethical culpability, stating: “When agency no longer ends ‘at the skinbag,’ [Clark’s euphemism for the body] then neither do attributions of responsibility and irresponsibility” (579).

Clark’s response is that even Cartesian, Romantic, biology-based judgments of agency and ethical action are already contested, and that it is no more problematic to hold a distributed agent accountable for their actions, choices, and desires than it is a skinbound one (or Cartesian one or whatever), because these agents are just as able to manipulated by external forces such that they are exculpated of responsibility (society’s fault, not guilty due to insanity, etc.) (“Negotiating Embodiment: A Reply to Selinger and Engstrom” 586).

So ethics don’t go away just because we’re dealing with a distributed agent (a “non” distributed agent is just as problematic, and we make ethical determinations anyway). As such, the judgments really aren’t that different. We can see this by looking at an example from the international, user-editable online encyclopedia Wikipedia…

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Knowledge is produced on Wikipedia through the various, frequently-competing page modifications posted by Wikipedia users. “This allows Wikipedia,” its administrators argue, “to be a place not only of information but of collaboration” (“Who Writes”).

As with any such system, disputes inevitably arise. However, rather than referring conflict resolution to a central authority, Wikipedia explicitly establishes a framework to govern productive discourse that is supported through a wide network of editors, mediators, and arbitrators arising from the user community itself. This casts Wikipedia as what Clark calls a “self-organizing knowledge structure” (Natural-Born Cyborgs 145). Drawing from artificial intelligence researcher Rodney Brooks, Clark states that these entities are not controlled by “a central planner or reasoner. Instead, we see a ‘collection of competing behaviors’ orchestrated by environmental inputs” (Being There 14).

So this is how Wikipedia sustains: not through Kuhnian paradigm shift so much as through continual iterative stretching.

The structure of Wikipedia allows it to function as a designer environment that promotes the cognitive enterprises of its participants. Wikipedia manages this through what is called "soft security" (a term that recalls Clark's "soft self"), a policy widely used in wiki communities. Following the doctrine of soft security, Wikipedia administrators rarely exert overt conflict resolution techniques, but rather seek to build a goal-driven framework that is conducive to productive user participation and self-sustenance. As one wiki community states, soft security "works architecturally in defense to convince people against attacking and to LimitDamage [sic]. It works socially in offense to convince people to be friendly and to get out of the way of people adding value"

Wikipedia's own information on soft security states that such systems depend primarily on decentralized control and "elaborate social security systems such as the moral network in a tightly-knit community such as a cluster of friends on a busy city street" ("Soft Security").

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One example of this policy in practice is found in Wikipedia's "Great Famine" page (which covers what is commonly called the Irish Potato Famine). Over time, the content of this entry became subject to much debate, mostly centering around the British government's possible culpability in the famine as well as its duration and scope, and even its name. Eventually, users referred the issue to arbitration, which is handled by user moderators whose policy is not to rule on content issues but to resolve conflicts stemming from participant conduct and thereby promote the overall health of the system. (There are different elements of the system, though these figures are pulled from the user community.) In this case, some users were found to have acted in a way that undermined the system, and were subjected to the penalty of not being able to make changes to the content page for a certain amount of time.

What's crucial about this is the way that distributed identity and ethics are interwoven. The participants in the "Great Famine" arbitration are identified only through usernames, such as SirFozzie, sony-youth, Domer48, and Sarah777. These selves are assembled from fragments of contributed text and other media, and yet they are coherent enough to be culpable. The user Sarah777 reacts to the possible consequences hinging on the case's outcome by vehemently asserting her value to the community:

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I find the suggestion of a ONE YEAR BAN to be contemptible and completely OTT - and bizarre. So much over the top that I REFUSE to participate in this charade until the suggestion/threat is withdrawn. I have instigated over 300 articles and made over 7,600 edits in one year on Wiki; all on geographical topics. NOT ONE (from memory) related in any way to the issue of British Imperialism. Unlike Sony and some others,

involvement in the "controversial" articles is but a tiny part of my Wiki activity. But I am not by nature inclined to grovel, apologise or bend the knee (where such is manifestly not merited). (Sarah777 02:31, 9 August 2007 (UTC))

So her stance isn't that she's objectively correct; it's that she's a productive system member.

What's interesting here is that Wikipedia allows completely anonymous editing, so any penalties could be easily circumvented by not logging in, yet these distributed personas accrue palpable ethos. Identities are responsible and culpable, and the buy-in is such that punishment is real. Yet, participation in the system isn't completely precluded because of different access.

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So what's important is that the system is a broad network. It is environmental, and it's policies are intended to be self-sustaining by limiting damage to the system.

[bullets]

MY SUGGESTION IS THAT DECORUM IS A PRODUCTIVE CONCEPT TO UNDERSTAND HOW ETHICS OPERATE IN A COMPLEX WORLD OF DISTRIBUTED AGENCY.

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seemliness
Beauty
Symmetry
Harmony
Balance

Certainly speech (On Oratory)
Touches upon observing social norms and not giving offense (On Duties I.99, I.148)
But also external appearance (On Duties I.130-1)
And one's house and goods (On Duties I.138-40)

What we're talking about her is identity being enmeshed with a wide network of things and behaviors. It isn't some Hallmark nonsense about your true self; it is an identity that is distributed.

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What we're talking about here is a complex system, and decorum (seemliness, beauty, symmetry, harmony, balance) are invested in keeping the system sustained. That's what makes conduct good. (Indeed, some claim Cicero's view is a response to civil upheaval).

So in its radical form, we're not necessarily talking about a codified system of manners; we're talking about the actions that keep a situated system self-perpetuating.

We might think back to the connections with environmental "soft security." Individual ethics is bound to preserving system health, just as systemic ethics (it's "morality") is bound to enabling all participants to make productive contributions.

Ethics is conventionally defined in an autonomous, Cartesian, Romantic mode—did he do the right thing?

We now shift the issue of ethics to the system—do his actions make the system self-sufficient? Does the system allow for all participants to add value (this is equivalent participation)?

Ethics becomes situated, but more importantly, "good" conduct is that which keeps the system sustainable. The unethical is in-sustainability.

This is because identity exists not as an autonomous agent, but as a property of a complex system. "For who we are," Clark writes, "is in large part a function of the webs of surrounding structure in which the conscious mind exercises at best a kind of gentle, indirect control" (Natural-Born Cyborgs 174, emphasis in original). Clark states that the self "emerges as something like a new-style business manager whose role is not to micromanage so much as set goals and to actively create and maintain the kinds of conditions in which various contributing elements can perform best" (Natural-Born Cyborgs 135). This gives us insight into ethical action in a complex milieu: creating and maintaining conditions that enable contributing elements to perform best, i.e., perpetuate system health. And individuals and systems are still responsible for ethical action.

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We can see the potential pitfall: namely that this seems to sidestep the question of morality. If making the system self-sustaining is the ethical goal, doesn't this obviate the question of morality? What if the system itself is immoral?

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The hyperbolic example of Nazi Germany.

One response to Nazi Germany is that it was immoral, which is true, but it appeals to an external, presumably stable morality (murder is wrong, physical oppression of descent is wrong, intimidation is wrong, etc.).

Another view is that its precepts weren't self-sustaining. The Allied military did the job, but the root cause was an architecture that wasn't self-sustaining. It promoted a system that couldn't support itself over time and with increased purview (the Allies in essence

became parts of the system), because its policies didn't allow parts to add value. It's policies of aggressive growth, physical suppression and intimidation could not last.

So we don't have a situation where the principle is that the system must survive at all costs, because such a principle actually doesn't lead to self-sustenance. Recall Clark: the purpose of the system is to enable all parts to be productive; the purpose of the parts are to maintain system health. What we see in the Wikipedia example is that the incorporation and management of dissent (or system noise), not the quashing of it, may be a tenet that supports self-sustenance.

The solution then is wide, distributed input. This prevents insularity and groupthink, and leads to a self-sustaining system.

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I realize that some of this seems mechanistic, and perhaps abstruse, but let me point to some things…

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When I see issues like the economic collapse, and the push toward renewable energy and sustainable resources and methods, I'm reminded that these issues are tangible and immediate. What is ethical is that which is sustainable, and what makes it so isn't a consuming, repressing drive to survive (as in Nazi Germany), but a open environment wherein all components are able to add value to the system.