

Chapter XIII

Ethical Theories and Computer Ethics

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ABSTRACT

The development of cybernetics and digital computers prompted the need for a greater exploration of computer ethics. Information ethics, as described by Floridi and Sanders (2003), offers a conceptual basis for such an exploration. This chapter provides an historical perspective on the development of a foundation for the study of computer ethics. A brief explanation is provided of a number of ethical theories (Divine Command; Ethics of Conscience; Ethical Egoism; Ethics of Duty; Ethics of Respect; Ethics of Rights; Utilitarianism; Ethics of Justice; Virtue Ethics) followed by a number of perspectives on the development of computer ethics. The Innovative Approach proposed by Floridi et al concludes the chapter.

INTRODUCTION

The origins of computer ethics can be traced to the 1940s to the time at which cybernetics and digital computers were first developed. These developments prompted Wiener (1948) to recognise both the good and evil inherent in these artificial machines. Since then, attempts have progressively

been made to explore computer ethics from a variety of perspectives including that of computer ethics as not a real discipline, as a pedagogical methodology, as a unique discipline, as applied ethics, and as employing information ethics as the foundation of computer ethics.

The increasing integration of information and communication technology (ICT) into society

has driven the need to understand and develop foundations for computer ethics.

This chapter provides an historical perspective on the development of a foundation for the study of computer ethics. A simple case study (software piracy) is used throughout the chapter to illustrate points.

ETHICAL THEORIES IN BRIEF

Often we have to make decisions when all the facts cannot be known with certainty. In such cases we have no choice but to rely on the best information we have, and when we are not experts ourselves, this means deciding which experts to trust. (The Elements of Moral Philosophy, p. 9)

Lawrence Hinman, Director of the Values Institute and Professor of Philosophy at the University of San Diego provides nine bases upon which moral or ethical decisions are made (Hinman, 2002, p.3-11).²

Divine Command Theories

Divine Command Theory is an ethical theory that states that to be good one must do what God commands you to do. Teachings from the Bible, the Qur'an or other sacred texts are considered to present authoritatively that which leads to what is right. The problem of the Divine Command Theory is summed up in the Euthyphro Dilemma – in short, is it right because God commands it, or does God command it because it is right? With regards to the issue of piracy, one might say that in terms of the Judaeo-Christian commandment 'thou shalt not steal', piracy is proscribed.

The Ethics of Conscience

In this theory, what is right is defined by one's 'inner voice'. Whilst this can often have a religious source and operate out of a religious context, it may

also be founded solely on human nature. However, in both cases the conscience must be properly formed. In its negative dimension, conscience tells us what is not right and makes individuals feel guilty, facilitating the possibility of atonement. With regards to piracy, our conscience would compel us to feel guilty for doing something that is immoral, provided we recognised that piracy is illegal and a form of theft, and that we accept that violation of this illegality does not serve a higher good.

Ethical Egoism

In this theory, each person ought to do whatever will best promote his or her own interests. Ethical egoism is often argued to be self-defeating in that, a society of egoists do worse for themselves than a society of altruists (see for example the classical philosophical game – the Prisoners Dilemma). Another fundamental objection is that it is inconsistent with the nature of trust and friendship that each party should be motivated solely by self-interest. With regards to piracy, an ethical egoist might pirate software because it would be in their own interests to acquire the software in the most expedient and efficient way to themselves (that is without paying for it). However, it could be argued that in the long-term, should one be caught, the consequences of pirating software are not in an individual's own interests or indeed if pirating undermines the business it may undermine the egoists own interests in new up-to-date software.

The Ethics of Duty

The ethics of duty begin with the conviction that ethics is about doing what is right, about doing one's duty. Duty can be defined by a classical Kantian appeal to universal reason (our duty is to follow rules that we could consistently will to be universal laws – that is, rules that we would be willing to have followed by all people in all

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