Chapter XIV

Conclusion

Writing this book was very much a learning process for me. I began with the idea that the theories of John Rawls might be able to illuminate ethical problems involving information technology. It soon became clear to me that approaching ethics through higher level principles like those of Rawls was the correct approach. Since ethical problems of IT confront us with new situations that can’t be handled in the same way as familiar cases, the only constant is the principles behind the cases.

The principle of principles that I believe regulates ethical reasoning is that higher order principles solve conflicts between lower level principles. Rawls has a powerful mechanism to generate these principles in the social realm: A social contract to follow Principles of Justice everyone would agree to from an initial position of equality. I applied Rawls’ principles in social contexts after first
investigating the ethical position of the IT professional. I believe that IT professionals are aware that they have distinctive ethical responsibilities, even without the benefit of a formalized professional structure of such professions as Medicine and Law. Nevertheless, as IT professional codes of conduct recognize, there can easily be conflicts between professional duty and the wider institutional context.

From a social contract point of view like Rawls’, justice takes priority over efficiency, although efficiency contributes to justice. Looked at this way, corporations often seem to appear in a rather negative light. The chapters in Sections II and III exhibit Microsoft’s monopolistic practices, Wal-Mart’s supply-chain brutalities, the offshoring of IT jobs, and the attempts of music and movie corporations to extend copyright and legally terrorize ordinary citizens. However, when political commentators as diverse as Pat Buchanan and Ralph Nader, and the editors of BusinessWeek, regularly call attention to excessive corporate power, I don’t think my observations are out of place. No one would deny the economic benefits provided by corporations. But efficiency is not justice. The difficulty is that corporations are under no ethical constraints whatever and thus are no longer subject to control by individual citizens.

Rawls discusses this issue only indirectly. He was concerned about possible accumulations of political power that would greatly diminish the equality of political influence, but considered campaign finance reform as the only remediation.

In this case, one major background problem for social contract theory is that social contracts are possible only between agents with powers of the same order of magnitude. (The philosopher Thomas Hobbes is especially clear about this.) Thus, corporations are not easily included in the social contract.

Because Rawls’ prime concern was principles governing political life in societies, his treatment of individual ethical rights needed to be extended to meet cases of IT ethics involving individuals. The proper ethical relation between corporations and individuals seems to me to require outside ethical constraints on corporations, precisely because they are not ethical individuals but only legal constructs. I suggested starting with very straightforward requirements such as: No killing people; no lying to cover up the corporation’s mistakes; no thwarting the legitimate rights of the corporation’s employees through union-busting; and complying with accepted accounting standards for truthfulness in financial reporting.
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