Personal Information Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

Beginning with information ethics that is based on the machine-independent concept of information recognized to have an intrinsic moral value, personal information ethics (PIE) goes further by conferring moral value on personal information itself. PIE gives moral consideration to the well-being of any personal information based on the moral concern for the welfare of its proprietor.

INFORMATION ETHICS

According to Froehlich (2004), the issues in information ethics (IE) were raised as early as 1980, and the field of IE "has evolved over the years into a multi-threaded phenomenon, in part, stimulated by the convergence of many disciplines on issues associated with the Internet." Mathiesen (2004) suggests that "information ethics can provide an important conceptual framework with which to understand a multitude of ethical issues that are arising due to new information technologies." IE has encompassed issues that stem from connecting technology with such topics as privacy, intellectual property rights, information access, intellectual freedom, and so forth.

Floridi (1998) proposed to base IE on the concept of information, as its basic phenomenon is recognized to have an intrinsic moral value. Floridi (1998) considers IE to be the philosophical foundation that provides the basis for moral principles that guide problem-solving procedures in computer ethics. According to such a conceptualization of IE, objects are "information objects" and all information objects have inherent moral value. "This information ethics…must be the environmental ethics for the information environment" (Floridi, 2001). "[A] person, a free and responsible agent, is, after all, a packet of information…We are our information, and when an information entity is a human being at the receiving end of an action, we can speak of a me-hood…What kind of moral rights does a me-hood enjoy? Privacy is certainly one of them, for personal information is a constitutive part of a me-hood" (Floridi, 1998). Mathiesen (2004) criticized such a theory of IE since "a theory of information ethics will need to specify the relation between persons and information such that information can be of ethical import."

Al-Fedaghi (2005a) claims that studying the relationship between information and privacy needs a precise definition of personal information. Personal information is said to denote information about identifiable individuals. Assertions about individuals are personal information. Consequently, assertions are categorized into the following types:

i. a non-personal assertion that has no referent signifying a person,
ii. an atomic assertion that has a single referent signifying a single person, or
iii. a compound assertion that has several referents signifying more than one person.

Assertions (ii) and (iii) are personal information where the referent(s) refer(s) to (a) person(s). On the other hand, *Spare part ax123 is in store 5* is non-personal information because it does not refer to any identifiable person. *John and Mary are in love* is compound information because it has two referents. The personal information can be sensitive, confidential, ordinary, trivial, and so forth, but all of these types are encompassed by the given definition: they refer to persons. *Reference* implies unique identifiability.

The relationship between persons and their atomic personal assertions is preserved through the notion of *proprietorship*. Proprietorship of personal information is different from the concepts of possession, ownership, and copyrighting. Any atomic personal information of an individual is proprietary personal information of its proprietor (the referent). Compound personal information is proprietary information of its referents. It is privacy-reducible to a set of atomic assertions.

PERSONAL INFORMATION ETHICS

According to IE, all objects are information objects and all information objects have inherent moral value. "Information" has been an unsettled issue in different domains of inquiry such as computer science, library science, law, economy, and philosophy. Its nature and characteristics are studied typically from the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic aspects. There are many conceptualizations of human beings as information processors, seekers, information consumers, information designers, and as "packets of information." On the other hand, privacy always has been promoted as a human trait; hence, information and privacy are combined resulting in a unique human notion that is vital and valued: personal information.

We observe that there is a difference between the conceptualization of a human being as an information entity and as a personal information entity. Consider the case of "the husband who reads the diary of his wife without her permission" (Floridi, 1998). Suppose that the diary does not include any personal information, but contains nothing other than comparisons between scientific materials related to the wife's profession. Are such materials "private" and thereby considered for treatment similar to that extended to human beings, themselves? What if the diary contains other people's personal information that is in the wife's possession? In this case, does "treatment similar to that extended to human beings, themselves" refer to the wife, the other people, or both? Suppose that the diary includes only personal information regarding the wife's friend, "Jane." An IE justification may lead to the interpretation that the husband's intrusion is wrong because it is an intrusion on Jane as an information entity. The wife's position as an ethical patient in this ethical discourse is unclear. What if the husband read the diary with the permission of his wife? What if the husband found in his wife's diary information about himself? Do we consider the husband an ethical agent who stumbled on "a constitute part" of his-hood (the ethical patient)?

Al-Fedaghi (2006a) proposed to adapt Floridi's notion of the moral value of information to personal information such that personal information ethics recognizes personal information itself as having an intrinsic moral value. The term "ethics of private [personal] information" appeared in several publications, apparently, without recognizing it as a coherent area of applied ethics with distinct ethical concerns.

For example, the International Council for Science (ICSU, 2004) mentioned in its 2004 annual reports the need to "facilitate dialogue on ethics of personal information in databases."

Recognition of the intrinsic ethical value of personal information does not imply prohibiting acting upon the information. Rather, it means that while others may have a right to utilize personal information for legitimate needs and purposes, it should not be done in such a way that devalues personal information as an object of respect. Personal information consists of "human parts" with intrinsic value that precludes misuse. "Human parts," as used here, does not imply a kind of sacredness; rather, it expresses a relationship to humaneness that may be as valuable as a brain or as insignificant as some parts of the hair or nails. For example, the ontology of the person's genome is on the border between material and informational forms of being. A person can collect pieces of hair to know the sequences of the DNA; hence, in this case, personal information is literally, in Floridi's words, "part of me-hood."

PIE is concerned with the "moral consideration" of personal information because personal information's "well-being" is a manifestation of the proprietor's welfare. The moral aspect of being a piece of personal assertion means that, before acting on such information, an ethical agent should consider its "being private," in addition to other considerations (e.g., its significance/insignificance). This extension of ethical concern is a kind of infosphere/biosphere mixture since the *patient* is an informational "beingness" of a person.

Personal information is considered to have a higher intrinsic moral value than non-personal information. From the privacy side, the moral worth of personal information is based on the assumption that the proper "beneficiary" of the moral action is the proprietor of the personal information. Thus, the intrinsic moral status of personal information comes from the intrinsic moral status of its proprietor. To phrase it more accurately, the "moral consideration" of personal information by agents stems from the proprietor's right to "privacy."

The individual's role as a moral patient comes indirectly through having his/her proprietary personal information affected by the agents' activities on that personal information. Consider the act of possessing personal information that is not one's own, against the proprietor's will, whose consent is not unreasonably withheld. What is wrong with such an act is not the

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