Information and Communication Technology Ethics and Social Responsibility

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INTRODUCTION

Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have penetrated during the last 20 years all human activities everywhere on the Earth. Humanity has entered into the information age, virtual reality and even virtual worlds have been crated.

The basic ethical questions stay as they have always been: How are we to live? What are we to be? Basic answers are, of course, that we ought to live good lives and be good persons.

The aim of this article is:

- To specify what "living a good life" and "being a good person" could be in the information age;
- To identify some challenges and opportunities ICTs offer in this context.

Having absolutely stabilized basic questions and basic answers makes the methodology of ethics quite different from the methodology in sciences. In sciences, one starts with a thorough review of previous research, specifies some new and interesting research question, makes hypotheses about possible answers and bases argumentation on data. In ethics, one reflects problems of the current age in a mirror that was created centuries ago and has been polished by many ethical reflections ever since. Forms of ethical texts are rich: dialogs, even poems, but the most used form is an essay.

BACKGROUND

Literature review in research articles is used for showing that the research described in the article fits into research themes that are interesting for contemporary research community. Literature review in ethical reflections is used differently, just for illustration of ideas that have been published in the area of interest and for "opening the scene".

Looking into the Web of Science database in September 2015 and using keywords "information technology", "ethics" and "social responsibility" 60 entries are obtained (from that 55 articles or conference proceedings), 31 entries being published since 2010. This reveals not high but steady and increasing activity on the interdisciplinary border between ICTs and that part of ethics that is linked to social responsibility.

Looking closer into the content of those articles, following themes can be identified in the last decade:

- Ethical questions linked with the creation and use of "big data", including creation of agreed standards of good practice - e.g. (Rizk&Choueiri, 2006), (Light,& McGrath, 2010), (Celen, & Seferoglu, 2013);
- Development of sustainable information society - e.g. (Tsai&Chen, 2013), (Busch, 2011), (Niemela&Ikonen&Leikas&Kantola&Kulju&Tammela&Ylikauppila, 2014)

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2255-3.ch426

in the sense of an inclusive and environmentally friendly society; application of precautionary principle in the development of ICTs (Som&Hilty& Kohler, 2009);
- Corporate social responsibility of both ICT suppliers and users – e.g. (Tsai&Chen, 2013), (Busch, 2011), (Vaccaro&Madsen, 2009), including suggestions for standards of good practice (Patrignani&Whitehouse, 2014) and how to enable consumers to push companies to behave ethically with the use of ICTs (Watts& Wyner, 2011);
- University social responsibility (Arntzen, 2010); new teaching and learning culture based on ICTs (Stepien, 2010).

This indicates research activity that is driven by applications and can be contrasted with the research activity from the years before, that was pushed by theoretical considerations. (Lianos, 2000) e.g. starts with sociological concepts and identifies the threat that ICTs can atomize society through making development of personal trust obsolete. Lianos uses credit card as an example: one does not need to be trusted by the provider of money, the only thing that is relevant is the validity of the card. Technical norms replace moral and social norms.

Research fields may have different dynamics. It is quite usual that after the theoretical development some themes or even the whole field dissolve in applications. Nevertheless, after some time, both practitioners and applied researchers may find it useful to return to more generalizing theoretical reflection. In this article, the most general level of ethical reflection is being considered.

Ethics as practical philosophy offers a lot of valuable ideas that have been generalized from the real life problems of the whole human history. In this article, especially ideas developed by utilitarian philosophers, existential philosophers and the proponents of the "virtue ethics" can be identified. Two more areas of ethics linked with this article are "ethics of norms" and "casuistry". Readers are advised to find more detailed summaries of those three schools and two areas on web.

"LIVING GOOD LIFE" AND "BEING A GOOD PERSON" IN THE INFORMATION AGE

I

Issues, Controversies, Problems

Let us identify three challenges and three opportunities ICTs directly offer in the context of ethics. This gives a framework to this article from which the discussion of economic costs and benefits stays mostly out, even if economic costs and benefits surely have ethical impacts.

Specification of the first challenge builds upon the above described conclusion in (Lianos, 2000) that technical norms replace moral and social norms. Problem is that the network of moral and social norms has always been considered as something absolutely necessary for the identity of specific society and that the dissolution of this network means atomization and threatens the whole society.

The second challenge is linked with the current research frontier of ICTs, with virtual reality. Economic and social thinking is strongly based on utilitarianism and its basic persuasion that for having a good life pleasures must be maximized and pains minimized. ICTs allow creating a virtual reality in which the choice of pleasures is almost unlimited and in which we are able to avoid pain. The basic question here is the authenticity of such a life. It can be easy and pleasant but it loses any sense.

Above the basic utilitarian life level, another level ought to be built in which we ask if our activities are right. What is the right activity has been discussed in Western thinking for centuries since Plato and two basic outcomes are as follows:

- In a right activity, humans are used not as tools only. E.g. authors of new software ought to take into consideration not only how much they earn but if the software allows better self-realization of users, too;
- Real circumstances must be taken into consideration in following the basic target of