Chapter 1.19
The Central Problem in Cyber Ethics and How Stories Can Be Used to Address It

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ABSTRACT

The central problem in Cyber Ethics is: how do you establish ethical standards in a professional field that is defined by a rapidly evolving technology where the consequences of the technology and the impact of any ethical standards cannot be known in the time frame in which the standards must be established? Stories play a very important role in addressing this issue. This chapter explores the role of stories in Cyber Ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Several years ago, I was teaching an undergraduate computer literacy class and decided to liven things up a bit with a heated discussion on some current and relevant topic from the field of computer ethics. I thought I would start by asking if any of the students had "borrowed" software to do the homework assignments, rather than go to the lab, and, if so, did that make them thieves? Or, I would ask if privacy on the Internet was really all that important. After all, doesn't privacy restrict the free flow of information and hence represent a benign form of censorship? When I offered these ideas to the class I was confronted with the same intellectual lethargy that you get when presenting a topic which the students have already decided is irrelevant to their goals in life. I looked across the faces in the class with a combination of confusion and amazement. Personally, I think that discussions of this type can be intellectually stimulating and challenging. They involve complex issues, competing values, competing interests and often times important

but razor thin distinctions. So, I asked the class why I had received such a lukewarm response to my suggestions. After the customary shuffling in their seats, avoidance of eye contact, and stalls that may allow somebody else to speak, a student offered the following insight—"Ethics are just a bunch of rules that tell you what not to do." And therein lies a serious problem.

Shortly after that, I was attending a conference at the *Computer Ethics Institute* in Washington, DC and had an opportunity to see the "Ten Commandments of Computer Ethics." All 10 statements were stated in the negative. Don't do this. Don't do that. Don't do the next thing. The student was right. Computer ethics really was just a bunch of rules that tell you what not to do. In fact, after reading over the "Ten Commandments," I concluded that the most ethical thing I could do would be to get out of the computer field lest I transgress one of these daunting rules. How did computer ethics ever get into this dismal state?

Certainly one of the reasons is that computer ethics (now Cyber Ethics) has been dominated by a collection of unchallenged claims prescribing ethical behavior, or at least behavior that is considered to be ethical by prominent voices in the field. We have all heard most of these claims: you must not copy software, you must not violate the privacy of individuals, you must not use computer technology to exploit workers, you must not allow society to evolve into technological haves and have-nots, etc., etc. And these values are often reinforced by empirical studies that show repeatedly that undergraduates, men and women and even professionals often come up short on ethical behavior (Kreie & Cronan, 1998, 2000; Prior, M. et al., 2002). The problem arises when you challenge one of these claims and ask—why is copying software unethical? Or why is it so important to protect privacy? The problem is that there seems to be little critical thought behind these positions.

While these and many other similar issues are clearly important to both computing professionals and computer users, and are being discussed at length (usually from one side), I would argue that they are merely examples of a much larger issue that is not being discussed at all. I see the central problem in Cyber Ethics to be the means of determining ethical standards. Stated more clearly, the central problem in Cyber Ethics is: how do you establish ethical standards in a professional field that is defined by a rapidly evolving technology where the consequences of the technology and the impact of any ethical standards cannot be known in the time frame in which the standards must be established? Stories play a very important role in addressing this issue. Specifically, stories provide a means of exploring ethical issues for which the full range of consequences is not currently known. But, in order to justify this claim, quite a bit of explanation is in order.

BACKGROUND

The word "story" evokes a wide variety of different meanings. For example, if a student claims that he cannot turn in his homework because his dog ate it, you might question the veracity of this claim by asking, "Is that true, or is that just a story?" The implication is that there is truth and there are stories and never the twain shall meet. But true versus fictitious is not the same as true versus false; and a story can contain important truths, as we shall see, while still being wholly fictitious. Yet, there is a strong, and very unfortunate, bias in the modern world against the use of stories in the pursuit of truth. To some extent we can trace the blame for this bias to Plato, who replaced stories (Greek myths) with reasoned discourse and went on to claim that storytellers should be expelled from the ideal society. We now view the modern age as a testament to the value of rationality and reasoned discourse and any argument that promotes the use of stories sounds like an undesirable throwback to irrational, mythic pre-Socratic times. While Plato was certainly correct in his