Chapter 1.34
Digital Morality and Ethics

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INTRODUCTION

While "digital morality" and "digital ethics" may sound strange, the technologies that drive digital government and democracy operate as well in these less formal areas of social regulation. Information technologies can affect morality and ethics at several levels: facilitating compliance with moral rules, altering the formation of norms and rules, and aiding the ethical assessment of rules. This article sketches an account of ethical decision-making which lets us explore some threats and opportunities of the emerging technologies of digital morality and ethics.

BACKGROUND

The focus of this article is how new communication technology affects ethical decision-making. Since ethics has a large and controversial literature, we will simplify. First, while disagreement about substantive issues is wide-spread, there is greater agreement about the process of ethical decision-making. Most writers on ethics agree on what counts as ethical agents (i.e., most people, with minor disagreement about young children, some animals, and organizations). Further, there is wide agreement on the kind of decision-making broadly characterized as ethical. We summarize this agreement in terms of ethical decision-making having three components: compliance with moral rules, discovery of moral norms, and critical ethics. Second, while ethics has many dimensions, there is broad agreement in the social sciences that morality and ethics are coordination mechanisms. Agents who can discover the local moral norms and use them to govern their behavior can solve the coordination problems endemic to social life. The ability to critically assess alternative moral rules helps to solve the higher-level coordination problem of moral disagreement.

Although the terms, "morals," and "ethics" are used in a variety of ways, we shall use them to distinguish these two levels, lower and higher, respectively, of coordination and decision-making.

Rationality and Morality

Moral and ethical agents are a subset of rational agents, whose behavior tracks their values. Rational agents must be able to consider alternative courses of action and their outcomes, rank these outcomes in terms of relevant values, and select the most valued option. Therefore, moral agents inherit the problems of rationality: uncertainty and time constraints, problems of self-control (Rachlin, 2000), framing and other decision biases (Tversky & Kaneman, 1981). On most accounts, moral agents are distinguished from rational agents by a broader set of pro-social or altruistic values and a commitment to following moral rules. These features bring new problems specific to moral decision-making, such as balancing self and others (Schmidtz, 1998) and hypocrisy.

Social Morality

In addition, moral decision-making has a distinctly social component. Morality depends on moral norms, a subset of social norms that influence individual decisions. Social norms go under the name "conventions" in some literatures; "social equilibria" in others, and refer to existing institutions, rules, traditions, or practices (Binmore, 2004). All involve some coordination: strategic situations where most agents value doing what (most of) the others are doing. In addition, moral norms involve special motivations. Deviant behavior typically invokes both psychological (shame) and social sanctioning (blame).

The social component of moral decision-making can easily go wrong for lack of information, or due to misinformation. In several well-studied cases—college drinking in the US is most thoroughly documented–behavior is in a mistaken equilibrium (Greenberg, Dodd, & David, 1999; Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). Believing most other students drink heavily, many drink in excess to comply with the norm. Their beliefs are a self-confirming estimation of the group's behavior, which should be amenable to new information.

Ethics

Ethics aims at critically evaluating morality. Obviously, partisans of two competing norms in a society should not simply appeal to what their own norms require. They need to appeal to "higher" standards: human harm or benefit, rights, progress, national solidarity, tradition, or other ideals. Failures in ethical decision-making combine the problems surveyed for rationality and morality. Ethical decision-making has an ideal element that links it to other normative ideals, such as deliberative democracy.

COMPUTER-MEDIATED OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS

Having resolved the field of ethics (broadly considered) into three components, it becomes clearer how computer-mediated technologies can change, perhaps threaten, and hopefully improve each of them.

Moral Rationality

Computerization can assist rationality in myriad ways—from calculators through spreadsheets and databases—beyond the scope of this article. We will mention a few examples of aids relevant to the rationality of moral and ethical agents.

Visualization software is a major innovation relevant to normative rationality. These programs allow us to see how our values map onto the world. Examples are maps of political preferences and scorecards ranking firms and mutual funds by "ethical" scorecards. Calculators allow us to evaluate our choices in terms of our values. For example, global warming gas emissions calculators help us decide between our energy intensive

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