

Chapter I

Is Information Ethics Culturally Relative?

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, I examine whether information ethics is culturally relative. If it is, different approaches to information ethics are required in different cultures and societies. This would have major implications for the current, predominantly Western approach to information ethics. If it is not, there must be concepts and principles of information ethics that have universal validity. What would they be? I will begin the chapter by an examination of cultural differences in ethical attitudes towards privacy, freedom of information, and intellectual property rights in Western and nonwestern cultures. I then analyze the normative implications of these findings for doing information ethics in a cross-cultural context. I will argue for a position between moral absolutism and relativism that is based on intercultural understanding and mutual criticism. Such a position could be helpful in overcoming differences and misunderstandings between cultures in their approach to information and information technologies.

INTRODUCTION

Information ethics¹ has so far mainly been a topic of research and debate in Western countries, and has mainly been studied by Western scholars. There is, however, increasing interest in information ethics in nonwestern countries

like Japan, China and India, and there have been recent attempts to raise cross-cultural issues in information ethics (e.g., Mizutani, Dorsey and Moor, 2004; Ess, 2002; Gorniak-Kocikowska, 1996). Interactions between scholars of Western and nonwestern countries have brought significant differences to light between the way in which

they approach issues in information ethics. This raises the question whether different cultures require a different information ethics and whether concepts and approaches in Western information ethics can be validly applied to the moral dilemmas of nonwestern cultures. In other words, is information ethics culturally relative or are there concepts and principles of information ethics that have universal validity? The aim of this essay is to arrive at preliminary answers to this question.

MORAL RELATIVISM AND INFORMATION ETHICS

In discussions of moral relativism, a distinction is commonly made between descriptive and metaethical moral relativism. *Descriptive moral relativism* is the position that as a matter of empirical fact, there is extensive diversity between the values and moral principles of societies, groups, cultures, historical periods or individuals. Existing differences in moral values, it is claimed, are not superficial but profound, and extend to core moral values and principles. Descriptive moral relativism is an empirical thesis that can in principle be supported or refuted through psychological, sociological and anthropological investigations. The opposite of descriptive moral relativism is *descriptive moral absolutism*, the thesis that there are no profound moral disagreements between societies, groups, cultures or individuals. At issue in this essay will be a specific version of descriptive moral relativism, *descriptive cultural relativism*, according to which there are major differences between the moral principles of different cultures.

Much more controversial than the thesis of descriptive moral relativism is the thesis of *metaethical moral relativism*, according to which the truth or justification of moral judgments is not absolute or objective, but relative to societies, groups, cultures, historical periods or individuals.² Whereas a descriptive relativist could

make the empirical observation that one society, polygamy is considered moral whereas in another it is considered immoral, a metaethical relativist could make the more far-reaching claim that the statement “polygamy is morally wrong” is true or justified in some societies while false or unjustified in others. Descriptive relativism therefore makes claims about the values that different people or societies actually have whereas metaethical relativism makes claims about the values that they are justified in having. Metaethical moral relativism is antithetical to *metaethical moral absolutism*, the thesis that regardless of any existing differences between moral values in different cultures, societies, or individuals, there are moral principles that are absolute or objective, and that are universally true across cultures, societies or individuals. Metaethical moral absolutism would therefore hold that the statement “polygamy is morally wrong” is either universally true or universally false; it cannot be true for some cultures or societies but false for others. If the statement is true, then societies that hold that polygamy is moral are in error, and if it is false, then the mistake lies with societies that condemn it.

The question being investigated in this essay is whether information ethics is culturally relative. In answering this question, it has to be kept in mind that the principal aims of information ethics are not descriptive, but normative and evaluative. That is, its principal aim is not to describe existing morality regarding information but rather to morally evaluate information practices and to prescribe and justify moral standards and principles for practices involving the production, consumption or processing of information. A claim that information ethics is culturally relative is therefore a claim that metaethical moral relativism is true for information ethics. It is to claim that the ethical values, principles and judgments of information ethics are valid only relative to a particular culture, presumably the culture in which they have been developed. Since information ethics is largely a product of the West, an affirmation of the cultural

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