

# Chapter 1

## Computer Ethics and Neoplatonic Virtue: A Reconsideration of Cyberethics in the Light of Plotinus' Ethical Theory

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In normative ethical theory, computer ethics belongs to the area of applied ethics dealing with practical and everyday moral problems arising from the use of computers and computer networks in the information society. Modern scholarship usually approves deontological and utilitarian ethics as appropriate to computer ethics, while classical theories of ethics, such as virtue ethics, are usually neglected as anachronistic and unsuitable to the information era and ICT industry. During past decades, an Aristotelian form of virtue ethics has been revived in modern philosophical enquiries with serious attempts for application to computer ethics and cyberethics. In this paper, the author argues that current trends and behaviours in online communication require an ethics of self-care found in Plotinus' self-centred virtue ethics theory. The paper supports the position that Plotinus' virtue ethics of intellectual autonomy and self-determination is relevant to cyberethics discussions involved in computer education and online communication.*

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## INTRODUCTION

In online communication (i.e., online chat rooms, internet blogs, forums and social networks), a new tension arises between our *bodily existence* and our *online existence* (Capurro & Pingel, 2002). As Sherry Turkle states in her book *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, in the computer-mediated worlds “the self is multiple, fluid, and constituted in interaction with machine connections” (Turkle, 1995, p. 15). The network user is aloof; divided in a psychodynamic plurality of digital identities; both *alienated* from the physical world and *connected* in the digital realm of cyberspace and cybertime. According to Taylor, “the moment you enter a virtual environment you immediately have at least two bodies: a corporeal and a digital one” (Taylor, 1999, p. 439). The *digital self* is dispersed in a hybrid state of being; it experiences an individuation of multiple digital identities; a multi-divergency of digital existence that fragments the self-unifying psychic subject in various representations (Stanovsky, 2004).

In the digital realm of online communication, traditional ethical questions are reconsidered and new *aporias* arise concerning moral standards for human behavior. According to Forester and Morrison (1994), the three ethical theories of most likely relevance to computer ethics are ethical relativism, utilitarianism and consequentialism (p. 15). It has been supported that classical theories of ethics, such as virtue ethics, are worth knowing, since they provide a useful philosophical background, but, “they have limited relevance to everyday behavior in the IT industry” (Forester & Morrison, 1994, p. 14). However, virtue ethics has been revived in modern philosophical discussions; particularly after the work of Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, with some serious attempts for application to computer ethics and cyberethics (Moor, 1998; Coleman, 2001; Grodzinsky, 2001; Hermanns, 2007). Computer ethicists usually emphasize the

Aristotelian form of virtue ethics. Moor (1998) maintained that Aristotle’s virtue ethics may help us deal with the problem of the “ethics gap” and computer sprawl.

Virtue ethics is also relevant to the ontology of online communication and virtual reality. As Rafael Capurro maintains *being digital* brings forth a new kind of *digital ontology* with ethical and metaphysical implications (Capurro, 2001). In the world of online communication, the moral agent “should be guided more by an *ethics of care* and less by *utilitarian* and/or *deontological* premises that may lead either to a purely instrumental or moralist view” (Capurro & Pingel, 2002, p. 194). It is such an *ethics of care*, or more precisely an ethic of *self-care*, that is found in Neoplatonic virtue and particularly in Plotinus’ self-centered virtue ethics theory.

In this paper, I shall argue that current trends and behaviors in online communication require a self-centered virtue ethics standpoint. Plotinus’ virtue ethics offers a *self-centred moral theory* (Dillon, 1996; Eliasson, 2008; Plass, 1982; Remes, 2006; Smith, 1999; Stern-Gillet, 2009). I support the position that Plotinus’ virtue ethics of *intellectual autonomy* and *self-determination* is relevant to cyberethics and, particularly, the character-based moral act of moral selfhood applicable in computer education and ‘netizenship’.

## Ethical Theories in Computing

Computer ethics is related to the systematic study of the ethical and social impact of computers and computer networks in the information society (Bynum, 2001; Johnson, 2001; Stamatellos, 2007; Tavani, 2007). In contemporary normative ethical theory, computer ethics belongs to the area of applied ethics dealing with practical and everyday moral issues. It is usually claimed that computer ethics involves discussions on the moral principles that help the individual to make

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