Foreword

Being trained in history and philosophy and only involved with information technology as a “power user,” I was feeling both honored and ill-prepared to undertake the task of writing this foreword. I have worked on the edges of information technology as a user of databases and a writer of Web pages for the courses I teach, but I am by no means an information technology professional. I have a bit more experience with the study of ethics, especially social ethics, but I am not by profession an ethicist. Upon further reflection, however, I believe that my position halfway between the two fields that inform this work, as a student of ethical theories and a creator of simple information technology, gives me a unique perspective on Dr. Schultz’s work here. I have written a bit on the ethical and political impact of information technology as it relates to distance education and course structure. I have also been a colleague of Dr. Schultz’ for almost 12 years and have discussed many of the issues here with him before. All of this gives me a good position from which to begin, for the ethical implications of information technology are issues about which all of us ought to be concerned.

Specifically, what I have found missing in my experience is a work that guides users, writers, managers, and developers through the maze of value questions that envelop work with and within information technology. In my own work writing Web pages for my university courses, I have had to determine the answer to such questions myself (or turn to Dr. Schultz for advice and debate). For example, how do I predetermine access? Should my pages be password protected or openly available? Should I learn Flash and Java in order to expand the possibilities (and bandwidth requirements) of the information I’m displaying, or should I make it as simple and as transparent as possible so even users of older technology and dial-up can easily access what I’ve created? Mundane questions for some, but they are important in my line of work for reaching students and a broader international audience.
Or I have asked myself, how should the information in these Web pages be presented? Should I use lists, trees, tables, multiple linked pages, and so forth? What are the educational implications of organizing data in certain patterns? Should the presentation be understandable only to initiates or should it be easily understandable even if you're not enrolled in the course? I have made my own decisions on these matters (open availability, low-bandwidth requirements, simplified organization, ease of understandability), but I have made them after several attempts at other solutions, other combinations, and experience with failure.

In the end, these are questions about the values of information technology, about the costs and benefits of the work and the world that information technology creates. These are not technological questions, but ethical questions about how human beings treat each other within an environment mediated by information technology. To that end, Dr. Schultz has written a marvelous and informative work that combines reflections on the nature of Informational Technology with its ethical implications.

He has made two significant contributions to the field herein. The first involves moving the problems of ethics and information technology beyond the usual nexus of provider-client relationships, contract obligations, and copyright infringement. By looking at the way information is organized, distributed, ordered, and dispersed, Schultz has raised questions about the ethical effects of information technology on individuals and on society as a whole. By placing such questions within the framework of a quest for justice and equity, he holds up the work of information technology professionals to a higher calling than technocratic efficiency. Furthermore, he has placed all these questions in a context informed by philosophical and ethical reflections on technology itself, as well as information technology.

Such questions have usually been the province of cultural theorists, philosophers, or science fiction writers, and have generally been cautionary at best and dystopian at worst. Dr. Schultz, to the contrary, appreciates the liberating and developmental possibilities within information technology, while also highlighting how such technologies can be used in limiting and regressive fashions. These insights have been developed through the second major contribution this book makes.

Dr. Schultz brings together two highly influential theorists of the 20th Century: the American John Rawls (who wrote, among other things, on justice) and the German Martin Heidegger (who wrote, among other things, on technology). In the first place, bridging the worlds of analytic (Anglo-American, logical, scientific) and continental (European, humanistic, phenomenological) philoso-
phy is a daunting task only rarely completed successfully. In the second place, Rawls’ theories of justice, of evaluating the requirements for making just decisions with minimal assumptions, seem worlds away from Heidegger’s concern with our loss of meaning and the abstracted, dehumanized world created by technological development. Yet Dr. Schultz bridges these gaps, using each thinker’s work to fill the lacunae in their own. It is remarkable work of intellectual synthesis and practical application.

Whatever your background or reason for opening this book—an information technology manager looking for solutions to certain dilemmas, a student in an information technology course exploring the limits of the field, or a theorist interested in the ethical implications of information technology—you will be challenged and provoked by the arguments in here. You will find many to disagree with (I found a few), but you will also find many more to agree with, and a few about which you had not even thought. It certainly helped me think through some of the problems I encounter in my everyday role as user and part-time writer, and I believe it will help you do so as well, wherever you come from in approaching this book. Be prepared for a stimulating, thought-provoking, and challenging journey. At the end, you will be glad you took the trip.

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