Addressing the Central Problem in Cyber Ethics through Stories

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INTRODUCTION

The central problem in cyber ethics is not, as many might think, how to address the problems of protecting individual privacy, or preventing software piracy, or forcing computer programmers to take responsibility for the systems that they build. These are, of course, legitimate concerns of cyber ethics, but the central problem is how you decide what the right thing to do is with regard to these issues when the consequences of any responses cannot be known in advance. Stated more clearly, the central problem in cyber ethics is -

KRZGR\RXHVWDEOLVKHWKLFDOVWDQGDUGVLQDSURIHVVLRQDO¿HOGWKDWLVGH¿QHGE\DUDSLGO\HYROYLQJWHFKQRORJ\ZKHUHWKHconsequences 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 means of exploring ethical issues for which the full range of consequences is not currently known. But, in order to justify this claim, a few words of explanation are in order.

BACKGROUND

The word “story” means many different things to different people. For example, if one of your children tells you that your dog ate the neighbor’s cat, you might challenge 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 if it is a story, it cannot be true. But true versus fictitious is not the same as true versus false; and a story can contain important truths while still being wholly fictitious. If we are looking for precise intellectual truths, then perhaps stories are not the best medium for exploration. However, in areas where our understanding is unclear, either because we do not fully understand a phenomenon, or the phenomenon is not available for study because it exists in a possible world, stories play a very important role in advancing our understanding. To put a finer point on this argument, science and logic fail miserably at telling us what could be, or more importantly, what should be. In these two areas stories are powerful vehicles for intellectual explorations. A story, for the purposes of the current discussion, is a rendition or a telling of a series of true or fictitious events, connected by a narrative in which a set of characters experience and react to a set of actions or events and in doing so reveal something about the human character or condition. In order to see the value of stories for the exploration of issues in cyber ethics, three prior arguments must be made.

NARRATIVE VS. LOGICAL THINKING

Narrative and logical reasoning represent two distinct methods of making sense out of the world around us. They are both legitimate and both can be very rigorous (Bruner, 1986). Sometimes they provide alternative paths to truth and understanding. Sometimes one or the other provides the only path. Logical reasoning is general, context independent, objective and leads to a single conclusion. Narrative reasoning is specific, context dependent, open to subjective interpretation, and potentially leads to multiple conclusions. The characteristics of narrative reasoning are considered flaws when applied to logical reasoning. But the reverse applies also. A story that has only one interpretation and means the same to everyone is not much of a story. While narrative and logical reasoning are different kinds of reasoning, they are not mutually exclusive. A good narrative is also often quite logical in structure, and a good logical argument can often be better understood with a good narrative example. But for the most part, they are complimentary, alternative modes of thinking that provide different paths to truth and understanding.

To some extent, logical and narrative reasoning address different domains. Logic is well suited to mechanistic processes that can be reduced to logical description. Logic is good for articulating general principles and deductive reasons. Logic is useful for describing and explaining. While logic is good for describing “what is,” narrative is good for exploring “what could be” and figuring out “what should be”. Narratives are a useful means for understanding the complex and ambiguous issues in human affairs. They allow us to explore possibilities and experience situations vicariously. Narrative reasoning is particularly well suited to cyber ethics because many issues are not well understood and the goal of cyber ethics is not to discover truth about the physical world, but truth about human nature. Narrative fiction gives us a means to explore and discover truths about what could