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 -

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