Ethics of New Technologies

Joe Gilbert
University of Nevada Las Vegas, USA

INTRODUCTION

Information processing has been done through telling stories, drawing on cave walls, writing on parchment, printing books, talking on telephones, sending messages via telegraphs, broadcasting on radio and television, processing data in computers, and now by instantaneous network dissemination. Since the mid-1990’s, personal computers have been the instrument of choice for sending and receiving information, and for processing much of it. The technology is the latest in a long series, but social issues involved have not really changed. Issues of content (is it true? obscene?), ownership (whose picture/text/idea? whose parchment/telephone system/computer?), and impact (anti-government, anti-social, harmful to children) appear today just as they did hundreds or thousands of years ago.

BACKGROUND

New technologies enable people to do new things (send 20 copies of a memo at once) or to do old things in new ways, such as storing files (Freeman & Soete, 1997). Improvements in technology that are incremental do not usually introduce major social issues, but radical innovations frequently present new kinds of social opportunities and threats (Brown, 1997). Ethics is the branch of philosophy that studies interpersonal or social values and the rules of conduct that follow from them. Ethics deals with questions of how people should treat each other on a basic level (Berlin, 2000). It considers such issues as rights and duties and fairness or justice. Because ethics concerns itself with fundamental rules, its applications to specific new technologies might require both knowledge of the new technology and reasoning about its possible applications based on established principles of ethics (Burn & Loch, 2001; Halbert & Ingulli, 2002).

Philosophers have pondered and written about issues of ethics for thousands of years. Some of their writings on this subject continue to be read and debated generation after generation (LaFollette, 2000). Three basic approaches have been most common and most accepted in discussions of ethics.

• Utilitarianism maintains that the ethical act is the one that creates the greatest good for the greatest number of people.
• Rights and duties maintain that the ethical act is the one that acknowledges the rights of others and the duties which those rights impose on the actor.
• Fairness and justice hold that the ethical act is the one that treats similarly situated people in similar ways with regard to both process and outcome.

ETHICS AND TECHNOLOGY

John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham are the two philosophers most closely associated with utilitarianism. This view of ethics puts a high value on results, and holds that we must consider whether and to what degree our actions will bring pain or pleasure not only to ourselves but to all others who will be impacted by what we do (Frey, 2000; Mill & Bentham, 1987). A utilitarian would argue that the harm done to many individuals and businesses by viruses and worms far outweighs any happiness brought to their authors, and thus creating and disseminating such code is unethical. Similarly, a utilitarian analysis of music file-sharing would consider whether widespread free file-sharing might result in composers and artists deciding that it is not in their financial interest to continue writing and performing music. If this result occurred, not only the composers and artists but also their listeners would end up suffering harm that might outweigh the good that they enjoy from free file-sharing. Finally, a utilitarian analysis would favor products and policies that increase the spread of computer literacy and availability, since the Internet can bring great good to its users and computer literacy and availability makes such use possible.

Many philosophers have written about rights and duties (Sumner, 1987). The basic idea of this approach is that individuals do have rights, and that these rights are, practically speaking, worthless unless someone or some group has a corresponding duty. Thus, if I have a right to privacy, you have a duty not to monitor my every move (Kelly & Rowland, 2000). There are four basic sources of rights, and we will consider each in turn.

Human rights are possessed by every human, simply by virtue of being human. Among these rights are the right