Chapter III

New Millennium; New Technology; Same Old Right and Wrong

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What does ethics have to do with computer security in the new millennium? What, for that matter, did it have to do with computer security in the old millennium? To answer these two questions, we will start with a more fundamental question: what is ethics? In the first part of this chapter, we will briefly review ethics as a part of philosophy. We will examine three approaches that have been taken for hundreds of years as humans have tried to decide what is the right way to behave. We will then examine business ethics, which is an applied subset of the more general topic. Finally, we will explore specific issues which currently present themselves as matters of ethical concern in the world of computer security, and provide a framework for analyzing issues which have not yet presented themselves, but will do so at some future date.

Is it ethical to lend a friend a set of discs which contain a three hundred dollar program that you have purchased, knowing that he intends to load the program onto his computer before returning the discs? Is it ethical to hack into computer systems, as long as you don’t disrupt or corrupt the systems? Is it ethical to monitor the e-mail of your employees? In order to answer these and a host of other questions, it is useful to think about the common element in all these questions: is it ethical?

Ethics is a branch of philosophy. Philosophy is a field of study that has been actively pursued for at least twenty-five hundred years. It concerns itself with basic questions such as these:

— what does it mean to be human?
— what is truth, and how can we know it?
— what is beauty?
— what is the good life for humans?

The last of the above questions is the question which ethics attempts to answer.
Philosophy as a method of inquiry does not either admit or deny the validity of sacred texts. Many people throughout history have found their answers to the questions above and to others like them in religion. Some great philosophers have believed in many gods, some in one, and some in none. All agree that when they are doing philosophy the appeal to the word of god or to sacred writings is not a valid way of proceeding. Extending this approach, philosophers do not generally accept any appeal to authority as conclusive. Many philosophers have been very much aware of earlier thinkers and writers, but philosophical arguments are not settled by citing authorities. Philosophers begin either with facts from the world around them or with general principles from which they deduce specifics. They generally concern themselves with logic as a basic operating tool, and while they may disagree on some of the rules of logic, they try to reach conclusions based on a coherent and consistent set of logical rules.

Ethics is the branch of philosophy that addresses issues of human action from the perspective of their moral goodness or wrongness. Human actions can also be judged in a number of other ways, including efficiency, effectiveness, technical correctness, and others. When Aristotle (1953) asks what is the good for humans, or Jeremy Bentham (Mill and Bentham, 1987) asks whether an act produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number, or John Rawls (1971) asks whether a society distributes benefits and burdens in a just manner, they are asking, as philosophers, about ethics. In this chapter, we will consider the ethical views of some major philosophers in addressing questions about computer security in the new millennium. The problems we will examine are new; the principles we will apply are not. Since intelligent and perceptive people have thought deeply about ethics over a long period, and the writings of some of these thinkers have been read and discussed by many generations of humans seeking answers to ethical questions, we will not ignore this accumulated wisdom. However, in the spirit of philosophy, we will also not accept any of these views as true simply because someone said them.

Adults generally have a set of ethical principles with which they are comfortable. Some of the frequently cited sources of individual ethical codes include parents and teachers, religion, law, and societal customs. James Q Wilson (1993) has written a thoughtful book in which he argues that some moral sense is common to all humans. Psychologists generally agree that our sense of moral right and wrong is shaped significantly during our childhood years. For many people, religion provides the main source of moral judgments. Almost all religions prescribe that some actions be done (worship God, honor parents) and that some actions be avoided (murder, stealing, lying). People for whom religion plays a significant role often find religion to be not only a source for ideas about moral right and wrong, but a strong motivating force to follow these ideas in action.

Many adults equate law with morality, in the sense that they generally consider legal acts to be moral, and illegal acts to be immoral. This appears to be particularly true in the realm of business. While legal systems throughout the world concern themselves with the same kinds of things as moral systems, there are some major problems with establishing a simple identity between the legal and the moral. In the United States, laws at the federal level are made by senators and
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