Virtue and Virtuality: Technoethics, IT and the Masters of the Future

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to establish a foundation for technoethics of IT that makes an account of the virtual environment based within the lived situation of those who work and dwell in that emerging realm. The most important phenomenon for technoethics of IT is the relationship between knowledge about information and the capacity to turn information into knowledge. This relationship is embodied in being a Master of Information Technology. To achieve mastery of information and mould it into knowledge, a useful tool-like entity, is to have power in the contemporary world. Once this situation is recognised ethical questions arise of their own volition. A selection of these questions are dealt with in the following paper; they are the questions of the distinction between information and knowledge, the central issue of virtue and virtuality, and the distinction between stealing and sharing in the virtual environment. This paper constitutes a think piece; readers who have a stake in the virtual environment and its ethical makeup are urged to ask themselves these questions and come up with others in turn.

Keywords: Internet Ethics, IT Ethics, Knowledge, Phenomenology, Sharing, Technoethics, Virtuality

INTRODUCTION: TECHNOETHICS AND THE MASTERS OF TOMORROW

All traditional ethical study essentially has to do with the recognition of personal responsibility and right action in ‘the physical environment’ (Blackburn, 2002, p. 1). Technoethics strives to establish what specific or new ethical implications are thrown up by human use and engagement with technology. This paper sets out to investigate a particular question within technoethics, put simply: is there virtue in virtuality? For the purposes of this paper a distinction is drawn from the very beginning between the ethical status of actions undertaken wholly within the virtual environment, whichever specific one it might be (Secondlife, World of Warcraft, file sharing sites etc), and online or IT related activities that have what can loosely be called a “real effect”.

Floridi and Sanders coin and define the very useful term ‘artificial evil’ and go to some lengths to differentiate between the kind of evil that is fully contained within cyberspace and the two traditional notions of evil, natural evil and moral evil, that underpin real world expressions of ethical disapproval (2001). In order to establish a lived co-relate to this theoretical delineation between these different types of
action from the outset some examples are helpful: spamming, “Flaming” (intense sometimes rude or personally motivated discussion within a given online community) or data mining are generally regarded in one way whereas stalking, grooming or fraud are regarded in a very different way. This difference in ethical judgment occurs primarily because the first set of activities take place within the virtual environment, and are therefore regarded as less significant, while the second set of transgressions transcend from the virtual into the real, physical environment and are therefore regarded as far more significant. This discussion is limited to the kinds of activity that can be described as purely virtual in order to maintain a reasonably high level of clarity about the singular and specific nature of the ethical issues that emerge within the virtual environment. Spilling over into “real” actions in the “real” world would tend toward a reassertion of presupposed “real world” ethical norms when it is exactly the appropriateness of these norms that this paper, and technoethics in general, sets out to assess.

The virtual environment that this particular strand of technoethics examines is understood in a concrete sense as ‘the (eco)system of information acted on by digital agents’ and the structure of ‘information stored as bits... organized in vast tracts such as data-bases, files, records and online archives’ which is lent geometrical and metaphorical presence through being described as a web (Floridi & Sanders, 2001, pp. 55-66). This web itself is understood as a technological artifact or pattern of artifacts that has rapidly become ‘embedded within social political and moral spheres’ and in which those spheres themselves have become embedded to a significant extent (Luppicini, 2008, p. 4). As such it is understood in the more phenomenological sense as ‘... the true environment in which most people now spend most of their intentional lives as conscious beings’ (Floridi, 2001, p. 18).

Taking these established conceptions of the virtual environment as its foundations this paper contains an attempt at developing the field of IT technoethics through a phenomenological approach which makes a similar movement as that which took place in the history of phenomenology itself, namely the move from a Husserlian focus on intentionality and consciousness, or the “how we conceive of technology” approach, to a more Heideggerian study of being-in-the-world, or the “how we live with and in a technological environment” approach (Husserl, 1970; Heidegger, 1977). As Luciano Floridi put it, ‘the philosophy of information is phenomenologically biased’ and a technoethics of IT should therefore be phenomenologically grounded (2001, p. 18).

In order to make this movement from a theoretical to a lived perspective specific to the field of IT ethics, a move initiated by Albert Borgmann with regard to technology in general early on in the development of technoethics (Borgmann, 1987), an engagement with two further key components of technoethics is necessary: 1. its focus on the moral responsibilities of technologists and engineers and 2. the requirement that those technology-empowered persons should recognize their responsibility for their professional actions (Bunge, 1977, pp. 96-107). The specific group of technologists discussed in this paper, and with whom it was discussed, were students enrolled in a Masters of IT programme at the National University of Ireland Galway. This programme is designed to produce graduates who are technologically savvy yet grounded in a broad humanities education, yielding a group that was in an ideal position to offer insights into how aspiring Masters (and mistresses) of information technology construed their ethical responsibilities and the foundations for them.

After being presented with this paper the ten Masters students, who were of various ethnicities and nationalities including Irish, Nigerian, Indian and German, were asked to answer a specific set of questions that are raised in this theoretically driven engagement. This questionnaire is designed with the purpose of examining whether some or all of the underlying assumptions presented in the main body of...
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