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Computer Ethics

Responsibility Regained

In an address to the Computers and Quality of Life Conference in 1990, Gary Chapman, the director of Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility, described his perception of the state of work in computer ethics. He said that over the years he has attended many meetings where computer ethics and social issues were discussed and that he keeps hearing the same thing. In short, he has noticed no progress in the field. I think he is right.

The extensive discussion of computer ethics in the past few years has had little consequence. A look at the content of such discussion reveals a primary source of the problem, viz., the absence of a coherent concept of the subject. Starting from a clouded concept of computer ethics, one cannot derive clear ethical positions.

I will show the difficulties with the current concept and describe some of the problems created by this concept. Then I will offer an alternative approach to computer ethics that avoids the current difficulties and broadens the concept of computer ethics to include both proscriptive and prescriptive judgments.

The discussion of computer ethics includes such large social questions as:

- Should we sell computers to countries supporting terrorism?
- Is it right to replace unskilled workers with computer-guided robots?
- What are the health consequences of using video-display terminals?

The discussion also includes all sorts of individual abuses in the use of computers. There is a new species of "yellow journalism" about computing which consists of retelling stories of abuses committed with computers or of computer catastrophes. The problem is that these stories are presented as issues in computer ethics. They include stories of how someone committed fraud with the use of a computer, or of how someone used a computer to change grades or to design an effective drug-smuggling route. From these collections of tales one is supposed to abstract a coherent concept. If these are tales about computer ethics simply because they involve the use of a computer, then my use of a scalpel to rob someone is a problem of medical ethics and my hitting someone with a

law book is a case of legal ethics. Both the physician and the lawyer would find it absurd if we used tales such as these as evidence of the moral failures of physicians and lawyers. In the same way, the fact that an unethical act was facilitated by the use of a computer does not entail that the act is an issue in computer ethics.

The computer is a device that has an impact on almost every aspect of our lives, and as such it can be used in a broad range of unethical activities. This involvement of a computer does not, however, transform every such activity into a problem of computer ethics, just as the use of a junkyard's car crusher to conceal a murder does not turn the murder into a problem in junkyard ethics.

The absence of a clear concept of computer ethics allows one to include all sorts of interesting moral dilemmas as issues. For example, the following has been used as a problem in computer ethics. Johnny's mother is suffering from a rare, but manageable, disease. If uncontrolled, it has an unalterable, painful, and fatal outcome. The medicine to manage the disease is so expensive that the only way Johnny can pay for it is to use his computer to commit fraud. What is the moral thing for Johnny to do? This problem includes such large social questions as the responsibility of society for health care and the obligations of children to their parents. It also includes issues about how one reasons ethically: does one base reasoning here on duty, or on consequences? This problem is so broad that it can not be considered an issue of any particular type of ethics. Nevertheless, because a computer is tangentially related to the story, it is portrayed as an issue in computer ethics. The fact that such a complex moral problem is exceedingly difficult to resolve is used as evidence that issues in computer ethics cannot be resolved.

The claim that such problems cannot be resolved is an extremely dangerous position. If there can be no resolution to problems in computer ethics, then clearly we should not waste our time worrying about them.

The "no-resolution view" has been reinforced by some recent works. For example, Donn Parker uses a voting methodology to decide what is ethical in computing. In his book *Ethical Conflicts in Computer Science and Technology* (1977) he gathered the opinions of people from several professions and ranges from accountants,