


ILLINOIS TECH | College of Computing

ITMM 485 / 585
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Legal and Ethical Issues in
 Information Technology



1

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Ch1: Introduction to Ethics and the Law
Part 4: Three distinct perspectives of applied ethics



2

Learning Objectives:

- Recall the three distinct perspectives of applied ethics
 - ❖ Discuss how they are applied to cyberethics

ITMM 485/585: Legal and Ethical Issues in IT Slide 1-3

3

Cyberethics as a Branch of Applied Ethics

- **Applied ethics**, unlike theoretical ethics, examines "practical" ethical issues.
- It analyzes moral issues from the vantage-point of one or more ethical theories.
- Ethicists working in fields of applied ethics are more interested in applying ethical theories to the analysis of specific moral problems than in debating the ethical theories themselves.

4

Cyberethics as a Branch of Applied Ethics (continued)

Three distinct perspectives of applied ethics (as applied to cyberethics):

- **Professional Ethics;**
- **Philosophical Ethics;**
- **Sociological/Descriptive Ethics.**

5

Perspective # 1: Cyberethics as a Branch of Professional Ethics

- According to this view, the purpose of cyberethics is to **identify and analyze issues of ethical responsibility for computer/information technology (IT) professionals.**
- Consider a computer professional's role in designing, developing, and maintaining computer hardware and software systems.
- Suppose a programmer discovers that a software product she **has** been working on is about to be released for sale to the public, even though it is unreliable because it contains "buggy" software. Should she "blow the whistle"?

6



Professional Ethics

- Gotterbarn (1995) has suggested that computer ethics issues are *professional ethics* issues.
- Computer ethics, for Gotterbarn, is similar to **medical ethics and legal ethics**, which are tied to issues involving specific professions.
- He notes that computer ethics issues aren't, strictly speaking, about technology per se.
- For example, he point out that **we don't have automobile ethics, airplane ethics**, etc.

7



Some Criticisms of the Professional Ethics Perspective

- Is Gotterbarn's model for computer ethics too narrow for cyberethics?
- Consider that cyberethics issues affect not only computer professionals; they effect virtually everyone.
- Before the widespread use of the Internet, Gotterbarn's professional-ethics model may have been adequate.

8



Perspective # 2: Philosophical Ethics

- From this perspective, cyberethics is a field of **philosophical analysis and inquiry that goes beyond professional ethics**.
- Moor (2000) defines computer ethics as:
...the analysis of the nature and social impact of computer technology and the corresponding formulation and justification of policies for the ethical use of such technology. [Italics Added.]

9



Philosophical Ethics Perspective (continued)

- Moor argues that automobile and airplane technologies did not affect our social policies and norms in the same kinds of fundamental ways that computer technology has.
- Automobile and airplane technologies have revolutionized transportation, resulting in our ability to travel faster and farther than was possible in previous eras.
- But they did not have the same impact on our legal and moral systems as cybertechnology.

10



Philosophical Ethics: Standard Model of Applied Ethics

- Brey (2004) describes the "standard methodology" used by philosophers in applied ethics research as having three stages:
 - 1) Identify a particular controversial practice **as a moral problem**.
 - 2) **Describe and analyze the problem** by clarifying concepts and examining the factual data associated with that problem.
 - 3) **Apply moral theories** and principles to reach a position about the particular moral issue.

11



Perspective #3: Cyberethics as a Field of Sociological/Descriptive Ethics

- The professional and philosophical perspectives both illustrate *normative* inquiries into applied ethics issues.
- Normative inquiries or studies are contrasted with *descriptive* studies.
- Descriptive (and sociological) investigations report about "What is the case."
- Normative inquiries evaluate situations from the vantage-point of the question: "What *ought to be* the case?"

12

Sociological/Descriptive Ethics Perspective (continued)

- Review Scenario 1-4 (in the textbook) involving the impact of the introduction of a new technology on a community's workforce.
- Suppose that a new technology, *Technology X*, displaces 8,000 workers in Community Y.
- If we analyze the issues solely in terms of their sociological dimension, including the number of jobs that were gained or lost in that community, our investigation would be essentially descriptive in nature.

13

Some Benefits of Using the Sociological/Descriptive Approach

- Huff and Finholt (1994) claim that when we **understand the descriptive aspect of social effects of technology, the normative ethical issues become clearer.**
- The descriptive/sociological perspective can prepare us for our subsequent (normative) analysis of the ethical issues that affect our system of policies and laws.

14

Table 1-2: Summary of Cyberethics Perspectives

Type of Perspective	Associated Disciplines	Issues Examined
<i>Professional</i>	Computer Science Engineering Library/Information Science	Professional Responsibility System Reliability/Safety Codes of Conduct
<i>Philosophical</i>	Philosophy Law	Privacy & Anonymity Intellectual Property Free Speech
<i>Sociological/Descriptive</i>	Sociology Behavioral Sciences	Impact of cybertechnology on governmental/financial/educational institutions and socio-demographic groups

15



16