2-4-2009

Review of Information Technology and Moral Philosophy

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Information Technology and Moral Philosophy. Jeroen Van Den Hoven and John Weckert (Eds.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008) [415 pages]

Reviewed by Keith W. Miller and Bethany J. Spielman

Anthologies in information and computer ethics come in several varieties. *Information Technology and Moral Philosophy* is distinctive in that it presents a challenging and mostly unpublished set of articles by a multidisciplinary and internationally distinguished group of scholars on a broad range of topics. This is decidedly not a book aimed at the casual lay reader. It will be most appreciated by professional philosophers with a prior interest in information technology. The range of topics covered is broad, including, among others, the history of information ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, democracy, personhood, agency, trust, privacy and justice. Its twenty two contributors are based primarily in the United States and Australia, but the United Kingdom, Norway, Italy and the Netherlands are also represented. Contributors include scholars in philosophy, law, media studies, information science, and social science.

The first three chapters address foundational issues. In "Norbert Wiener and the Rise of Information Ethics," Terrell Ward Bynum shows that Wiener's early writings were remarkably prescient though sometimes insufficiently appreciated. According to Bynum, Weiner created the field of information ethics and provided it with a metaphysic that still influences the field, for example, the work of Moor and Floridi. James H. Moor's previously published "Why We Need Better Ethics for Emerging Technologies" argues that ethics must become more proactive and less reactive; encourages more active collaborations among ethicists, scientists, social scientists and technologists; and argues for more nuanced ethical analyses. In "Information Ethics: Its Nature and Scope," Luciano Floridi's provocative, Weinerian metaphysic shapes his view of information ethics as "an ecological ethics that replaces *biocentrism* with *ontocentrism*... [Because]…there is something more elemental than life, namely *being* – and something more fundamental than suffering, namely *entropy*." (p. 47)

Chapters 4-6 outline concerns about whether the Internet will improve or degrade democracy. James Bohman's "The Transformation of the Public Sphere: Political Authority, Communicative Freedom, and Internet Publics" explores tensions between democratization and the Internet. His interest in transnational interactions and institutions, developed in his *Democracy Across Borders*,[1] is evident in this chapter. Cass R. Sunstein echoes themes of his previous works,

[1] Bohman, J. *Democracy Across Borders: From Dêmos to Dêmoi*. MIT Press (2007).

Republic.com and *Republic.com 2.0*,[2] in "Democracy and the Internet." Sunstein warns that by helping to destroy both unanticipated encounters and common experiences, the Internet is moving in directions that may undermine democracy. Sunstein offers five proposals for improvement. Blogging is one of the activities that concerns Sunstein. Alvin I. Goldman, too, is skeptical about the blogosphere's contribution to democracy, but his focus is epistemological. In "The Social Epistemology of Blogging" he critiques Posner's optimistic view of blogging and highlights the danger of replacing the public's search for truth with individuals' search for confirmation of existing beliefs.

Chapters 7-10 explore how interpersonal trust, self-presentation, privacy, esteem and identifiability are affected by online relationships. In "Plural Selves and Relational Identity: Intimacy and Privacy Online," Dean Cocking examines how online communication affects control over self presentation. Although control facilitates privacy, it also reduces communications that are necessary for deep relationships. In "Identity and Information Technology," Steve Matthews explores two ways that IT affects self image: by enabling disembodied, computer-mediated communication; and by facilitating the replacement of human parts in the process of "cyborgisation." In both, IT dramatically affects our self-presentation, how others view us, and how we envision ourselves. Chapters 9 and 10 appeared together in a 2004 issue of *Analyse & Kritik*. In "Trust, Reliance, and the Internet," Philip Pettit distinguishes reliance from trust. Trust is a kind of reliance that requires a relationship between people because it is interactive and dynamic. Pettit concludes that although some forms of reliance are readily accessible through the Internet, humans are not able to effectively establish trust if there contact is only through the Internet. In chapter 10, "Esteem, Identifiability, and the Internet," which Pettit co-authored with Geoffrey Brennan, esteem and identifiability take the place of trust and reliance. Brennan and Pettit conclude that although bad actors can use anonymity for deceptive purposes, there can be good reasons for adopting pseudonyms, reasons that parallel those justifying offline modesty, nom de plume, and secret societies. (Chapter 10 includes three equations and a graph; in our opinion, one shouldn't use equations and graphs unless the units are explicit and precision can be justified either theoretically or empirically.)

Charles Ess' "Culture and Global Networks: Hope for a Global Ethics?" explores "convergences" and "divergences," progress and regress in policies that tolerate different ethical traditions. In an engaging "unscientific postlude," Ess invokes Aristotle and Confucius to show that although the challenge is daunting, the global reach of computer-mediated communication virtually requires that we

[2] Sunstein, C. *Republic.com*. Princeton University Press (2001); *Republic.com 2.0*. Princeton University Press (2007).

DOI: 10.2202/1941-6008.1054

continue to steer towards an ethical model that helps us live together harmoniously.

"Collective Responsibility and Information," by Seumas Miller, applies Miller's collective end theory to the acquisition, communication, storage and retrieval of morally significant knowledge via ICT. Miller's paper is problematic in several respects. He uses the term "data" to mean "so-called information…. which is false or non-propositional." (pp. 230-231) These reviewers have not seen "data" used as a pejorative before. He "reject[s] the proposition that nonhuman agents, such as institutions or computers, have mental states and can, properly speaking, be ascribed responsibility in any noncausal sense of that term." (p. 242) It seems abrupt to categorically dismiss the contrary arguments put forward since Ladd's arguments in a 1989 book (listed as 1988),[3] which Miller references. Miller also targets expert systems in his critique of computer intelligence, even though there are many sophisticated AI developments that are more relevant and more recent than expert systems.

Deborah G. Johnson and Thomas M. Powers share Miller's reluctance to call computer programs "moral agents," and justify their position more thoroughly. In "Computers as Surrogate Agents" they claim that seeing computers as surrogate agents of human makes unnecessary the debate about whether or not computers can become intelligent or gain consciousness. Following themes in science and technology studies, Johnson and Powers focus on the intentions of the humans who design, develop and deploy computers, not on the computers themselves. While they endorse the idea that we desperately need a moral accounting of automated surrogate agents, they deny that computers, even those that replace human surrogate agents, should be described as moral agents.

In "Moral Philosophy, Information Technology, and Copyright: The Grokster Case" Wendy J. Gordon analyzes the adequacy of the Supreme Court's reasoning about intellectual property. Like other legal scholars, she critiques the court's shift from consequences to the language of intent in this 2005 case.

"Information Technology, Privacy, and the Protection of Personal Data" by Jeroen van den Hoven encourages a truce among philosophers debating privacy. He maps an account of why seemingly innocuous personal data can be converted into personal identification, gives four moral reasons for the protection of such personal data, and concludes that the two major factions in the privacy wars (communitarians and liberals) should be able to agree on the first three moral reasons.

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[3] Ladd, J. Computers and moral responsibility: A framework for an ethical analysis, in C. Gould (Ed.), *The Information web: Ethical and social implications of computer networking.* Westview Press (1989).

"Embodying Values in Technology: Theory and Practice," by Mary Flanagan, Daniel C. Howe, and Helen Nissenbaum is unique in this collection in that the authors describe personal experiences developing a substantial IT project. They discuss the epistemological challenges facing conscientious designers and describe how these challenges were met as RAPUNSEL, a multiplayer game designed to teach middle-school girls to program in Java, was developed.

In an oft-cited article, Bill Joy suggested that restricting some kinds of scientific exploration might be appropriate.[4] Dag Elgesem uses Joy's suggestion, David Parnas's public rejection of the Star Wars project, and the European Union's requirement for informed consent from research subjects to illustrate proposed restrictions on research. In order to distinguish between the principles involved in the three examples, Elgesem explores the fact-value distinction, pure and applied research, Merton's CUDOS norms for scientific activity, freedom of speech, and the risks to human clones as research subjects. Elgesem's "Information Technology Research Ethics" concludes that proscription on the basis of unjustified risks of harm to identifiable individuals from the research process is appropriate, but that proscription on the basis of scientific content is inappropriate.

In the book's final chapter, "Distributive Justice and the Value of Information: A (Broadly) Rawlsian Approach," Jeroen van den Hoven and Emma Rooksby place access to information into the Rawlsian category of a "primary good." The authors examine objections to Rawls by five prominent critics: Pogge, Dworkin, Sen, Garfinkel and Walzer. They plan to further develop their application of the primary good notion with these objections in mind.

Information Technology and Moral Philosophy is timely and covers a great deal of territory. Its emphasis is on philosophical discourse on topics in information technology, but it also demonstrates that information technology does change philosophy. This is a valuable book, one that challenges readers to think more carefully about issues that are likely to become only more pressing in the near future.

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[4] Joy, B. Why the future doesn't need us. *Wired* 8(4) (2000), *available at* http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/8.04/joy_pr.html , accessed July 8, 2008.

DOI: 10.2202/1941-6008.1054