

A METAETHICAL ANALYSIS OF COMPUTER ETHICS

by

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Introduction:

"Metaethics" is a term which is subject to misunderstanding. William Halverson (1981) regards metaethics as "The generic name for inquiries that have as their object the language of moral appraisal." This definition reflects the viewpoint of the philosophy known as Linguistic Analysis. It does not, however, reflect my own understanding of the term. I would define metaethics as the generic name for inquiries about the source of moral judgments (i.e., about their basis) and how such judgments are to be justified. Taken in this sense, metaethics is not about isolated individual judgments concerning whether certain actions are right or wrong. It is about how a particular world view -- or more precisely, a weltanschauung -- underlies and conditions the formulation of such ethical judgments.

Thus, before one can make a judgment on whether a particular action is right or wrong, one must have adopted an understanding of what basic reality is about, and whether this particular action is in harmony with one's basic understanding of reality. In philosophy, this basic understanding of reality is called metaphysics. A person's preferred metaphysics is basically a statement of belief about fundamental reality. It is a "belief" because it is the most fundamental of assumptions one makes about reality. As such, it cannot be proven. The ancients defined metaphysics as "first principles," because once one assumes a ground of meaning only then can one go on to interpret the meaning of particular things and actions within the larger universe of meaning. Perhaps the reason that there exist a number of different metaphysics is that each person must ultimately make a personal explanation of the meaning of reality...and there are a number of possible meanings. Once a person adopts a metaphysical world view, that world view will necessarily govern her or his decisions about ethical matters. To put this another way, a person's view of reality will condition that person's view on value questions.

Objections of Linguistic Analysis

It is here that Linguistic Analysis would wish to take issue with my position (which is the position of traditional systematic philosophy). Linguistic Analysis believes (and I would note the word "believes," since the position of Linguistic Analysis is as much a belief as any of the traditional metaphysical positions) that statements about reality can be verified or validated in only one of two ways. Those ways are by application of the laws of logic, or by application of sense observation. Thus, linguistic analysts believe that what is not open to examination by logical analysis or to observation by the senses is not a proper subject for discussion.

Interpretations of ultimate reality are not subject to examination by logic or sense observation. By definition, as starting principles or as a base whereon to stand to make sense of reality, these interpretations cannot be subject to this kind of examination. Neither can discussions of right or wrong, which arise from and are based on these fundamental interpretations of reality, be subject to verification by logic or sense observation. Hence, linguistic analysts say that these kinds of questions are simply beyond the bounds of verifiable discussion -- that is, they simply cannot be talked about. Linguistic analysts would admit that there are indeed questions of morality, but they can only be spoken of in "emotive" terms, that is, in terms of how one "feels" about these questions. No determination is possible about whether something is objectively good or bad. Hence, one of the founders of the school of Linguistic Analysis, Ludwig Wittgenstein (1961), has said: "The solution of the riddle of life in space and time lies outside space and time, (6.4312)" and further, "We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched" (6.52).

I believe Wittgenstein and the linguistic analysts are wrong. I do not base my dissent on the fact that one basic assumption about the meaning of life is as good as another, but rather on something which should be recognized by linguistic analysts as acceptable verification, namely, empirical evidence. In 1989, Josephine C. Barger and I conducted research on a random sample of 347 students at a midwestern regional/comprehensive university. These students had academic majors representative of all six colleges in the University. Through the use of SPSSX discriminant analysis, Duncan multiple analysis, and SPSSX univariate analysis, we found (Barger & Barger, 1989) that there were distinguishable philosophies among the students. In other words, separate philosophical viewpoints (to be described below) were both real and measurable.

The Major Metaphysical Positions and their Resultant Ethics

The philosophies which were empirically evidenced in our research were the traditional systematic philosophies of Idealism, Realism, Pragmatism, and Existentialism (I am prepared to respond to the objection that Existentialism cannot be described as either "traditional" or "systematic," but I will spare the reader that response here). Idealism and Realism might be characterized as absolute or objective philosophies. Pragmatism and Existentialism might be characterized as relative or subjective philosophies.

Idealism:

The metaphysical position of the philosophy of Idealism is that reality is basically spirit rather than matter. For the Idealist, the idea is more real than the thing, since the thing only reflects or represents the idea. The world of spirit or idea is static and absolute. Socrates and Plato are perhaps the best known ancient representatives of this view. While Immanuel Kant and Thomas Hill Green are more modern Idealists.

Once the metaphysical view that reality is found in the idea is assumed, the ethical position that goodness is to be found in the ideal (that is, in perfection) automatically follows. Goodness is found on the immaterial level, that is, in the perfect concept, or notion, or idea, of something. Thus, perfect goodness is never to be found in the material world. Evil, for the Idealist, consists of

the absence or distortion of the ideal. Since ideals can never change (because they are a priori and absolute), moral imperatives concerning them do not admit of exceptions. That is, these imperatives are stated in terms of "always" or "never." For example: "Always tell the truth" or (put negatively) "Never tell a lie." Since truth is the knowledge of ideal reality and a lie is a distortion of that reality, truth must always be told and lying can never be justified.

Realism:

The person with a Realistic world view believes that reality is basically matter, rather than spirit. For the Realist, the thing is more real than the idea. Whatever exists is therefore primarily material, natural, and physical. As such, reality exists in some quantity and therefore can be measured. It exists independently of any mind and is governed by the laws of nature, primary among which are the laws of cause and effect. The universe, according to the Realist, is one of natural design and order. Aristotle was an early representative of this view. B.F. Skinner, the behavioral psychologist, is a more current representative.

The resultant ethical position that flows from a Realist metaphysics is one that views the baseline of value as that which is natural (that is, that which is in conformity with nature). Nature is good. One need not look beyond nature to some immaterial ideal for a standard of right and wrong. Rather, goodness will be found by living in harmony with nature. Evil, for the Realist, is a departure from this natural norm either in the direction of excess or defect (i.e., having, or doing, too much or too little of something which is naturally good).

Pragmatism:

For the Pragmatist, metaphysics is not so simple a matter as it is for the Idealist and Realist. Reality is neither an idea nor is it matter. It would be a mistake to view reality as either a spiritual or physical "something." Rather, the Pragmatist believes that reality is a process. It is a dynamic coming-to-be rather than a static fixed being. It is change, happening, activity, interaction...in short, it is experience. Reality is more like a verb than a noun. It is flux and flow where the concentration is not so much on the things as on the relationship between the things. Since everything changes - indeed, the Pragmatist would say that change is everything - nothing can have any permanent essence or identity. An ancient Greek Pragmatist used to say in this regard: "You can't step in the same river twice." For the Pragmatist, everything is essentially relative. The only constant is change. The only absolute is that there are no absolutes! The Americans Charles Sanders Pierce, William James, and John Dewey are representatives of this view.

The ethical result of the Pragmatic metaphysical position demands that value claims must be tested and proven in practice. This is so because meaning is inherent in the consequences of actions. In the Pragmatist's view, things are value-neutral in themselves. There is nothing that is always good, nor is there anything that is always bad. The value of anything is determined solely in terms of its usefulness in achieving some end. In answer to the question, "Is that good?", a Pragmatist would probably reply, "Good for what?" Thus, the Pragmatist believes that the end justifies the means. That is, if an act is useful for achieving some laudable end or goal, then it becomes good. To state this

another way, a means gets its positive value from being an efficient route to the achievement of a laudable end (a laudable end is one that brings about the greatest good for the greatest number of people). Thus, a means is not valued for its own sake, but only in relation to its usefulness for achieving some laudable end. Results or consequences are the ultimate measure of goodness for a Pragmatist, since the usefulness of a means to an end can only be judged after the fact by its effect on the end. Thus, for the Pragmatist, there can be no assurance that something is good...until it is tried. Even then, it is only held tentatively as good since a thing is good only as long as it continues to work. There can, however, be a dispute about which means are more effective for achieving an end. Indeed, there can be a dispute about which ends should, in fact, be pursued. Thus, the Pragmatist looks for guidance from the group. The reasons for this are metaphysical: reality is experience, but it is the experience of the whole. For the Pragmatist, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This means that the whole is more valuable than any of its parts. In the field of value judgments, the group's wisdom is more highly esteemed than the wisdom of any individual within the group.

Existentialism:

The Existentialist joins with the Pragmatist in rejecting the belief that reality is a priori and fixed. But instead of believing that reality is a process whose meaning is defined primarily by the controlling group, Existentialist metaphysics holds that reality must be defined by each autonomous individual. The Existentialist notions of subjectivity and phenomenological self emphasize that the meaning or surdity of an otherwise "absurd" universe is individually determined. Any meaning that gets into the world must be put in it by the individual, and that meaning or value will hold only for that individual. Thus each person's world, as well as each person's own identity, is the product of that person's own choice. Thus, each person can be defined as the sum of that person's choices. A person's world is what that person chooses it to be. Thus, reality is different for each individual. We each live in our own world and we are who we choose to be. Soren Kierkegaard and Jean-Paul Sartre are frequently associated with this view.

Like the Existentialist position on reality, its ethical position is that the individual must create his/her own value. There is no escape from the necessity of creating values. Just as the world is defined by the choices regarding reality that an individual makes, so the individual must express her/his own preferences. In making choices, or defining values, the individual becomes responsible for those choices. The individual cannot deflect praise or blame for those choices onto others. If the choices were freely made, then responsibility for them must be accepted. While groups might influence what choices an individual makes, there is a zone of freedom within each individual that cannot be conditioned or predetermined. While emphasizing a highly individualized choice of values, an Existentialist is not necessarily a non-conformist, but if an Existentialist does conform to the values of a group it will be because that person has freely chosen to do so -- not because they have been pressured to do so by the group.

The Problem of Consistency

The above outline of philosophical views might appear to oversimplify the basis for ethical decision-making. I would readily

agree that ethical decision-making in real time is a much more difficult process than might appear from the above summaries. For instance, our research (Barger & Barger, 1989) found that while most of the students we surveyed had a predominant leaning toward one of the four philosophies described above, they also had lesser leanings toward some of the other three philosophies. In other words, nobody is 100% an Idealist (...or Realist, or Pragmatist, or Existentialist).

This means that simply knowing a person's dominant philosophical outlook will not allow assured prediction of how he or she might act in response to a given ethical situation. This for two reasons: 1) the one just stated, that strong sympathies with other philosophical views besides one's dominant view might end up controlling action in this or that particular situation, and, 2) the fact that people do not always conscientiously act in a manner consistent with their beliefs. That is, they might fail to follow through with what they believe is the right thing to do in a particular situation.

Donn Parker, the key-note speaker at this Conference, would seem to have taken into account the first reason mentioned above in the guidelines which he proposes for resolving ethical dilemmas. Most of his guidelines appear to arise from an Idealistic basis. Certainly, the "Kantian Universality Rule" does. This Rule states: "If an act or failure to act is not right for everyone to commit, then it is not right for anyone to commit" (Parker, 1991, October 14). This is an alternate formulation of Kant's Categorical Imperative. Kant himself stated his Imperative three different ways, but his first formulation was: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (Kant, 1933). Alongside this Idealistic guideline, Parker proposes what appears at first glance to be a Pragmatic one ("The Higher Ethic"): "Take the action that achieves the greater good" (Parker, 1991, October 14). I say this appears to be Pragmatic because the Pragmatist would seek whatever was best for the group (as in the old Utilitarian motto: "the greatest good for the greatest number"). But even this pragmatic reading is not far from an Idealist outlook. Hastings Rashdall (1907) attempted to synthesize Idealism and Utilitarianism by holding that "the right action is always that which...will produce the greatest amount of good upon the whole." Whatever the exact philosophical analysis of Parker's guidelines may be, the fact that these guidelines may be representative of more than one fundamental viewpoint should not necessarily pose a problem for their usefulness in the area of practical ethical decision-making.

Divergent Solutions to Selected Computing Dilemmas

In conclusion, I offer some divergent solutions to three ethical dilemmas having to do with piracy, privacy, and power in computing. The divergence of these solutions is the result of their differing metaphysical and ethical viewpoints. For reasons of brevity, I will present what I call an "absolutist" type of solution which is characteristic of the Idealist and Realist views, and what I will call a "relativist" solution which is characteristic of the Pragmatist and Existentialist views.

Here is the piracy dilemma (i.e., a dilemma concerning wrongful appropriation of computing resources). Suppose I use my account on one of my university's mainframe computers for something that has no direct relation to University business. This use could be anything from sending an e-mail message to a friend, to conducting a full-blown private business on the computer (billing, payroll,

inventory, etc.). The absolutist solution to this dilemma would probably be that the above-described activities are unethical -- whether only the e-mail message is involved, or the larger-scale business activities (although the absolutist would recognize a difference between the two in the amount of wrong being done). On the other hand, a relativist might say that the latter activities were wrong because they tied up too much memory and slowed down the machine's operation, but the e-mail message wasn't wrong because it had no significant effect on operations.

Next consider a dilemma having to do with privacy. I use my account to acquire the cumulative grade point average of a student who is in a class which I instruct. I obtained the password for this restricted information from someone in the Records Office who erroneously thought that I was the student's advisor. The absolutist solution to this dilemma would probably be that I acted wrongly, since the only person who is entitled to this information is the student and his or her advisor. The relativist would probably ask why I wanted the information. If I said that I wanted it to be sure that my grading of the student was consistent with the student's overall academic performance record, the relativist might agree that such use was acceptable.

Finally, let us look at a dilemma concerning power. While I was a Professor at another university, if I wanted a computer account all I had to do was request one. But if I was a student at that university, I must obtain faculty sponsorship in order to receive an account. An absolutist (possibly because of a proclivity for hierarchical thinking) might not have a problem with this dual standard. A relativist, on the other hand, might question what makes these two cases essentially different (e.g., Are faculty assumed to have more need for computers than students? Are students more likely to cause problems on the system than faculty? Is this a hold-over from the days of "in loco parentis?").

Conclusion

The skeletal cases I have just presented are not meant to suggest that ethical solutions to computing dilemmas can be easily generated. Indeed, just the opposite is true. In the present world of computing, where ethical dilemmas are becoming ever more complex, the hope of finding a single normative code which would contain standards with which everyone would agree seems dim. That does not mean, however, that such an effort is futile. For example, it is possible for people of different philosophic world views to agree upon the same standards -- although for different reasons. Metaethical analysis may be helpful in exploring this possibility. That exploration, however, is beyond the scope of this paper. My concern here has simply been to show that one's philosophic world view predisposes one's ethical judgments.

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