

St. John Fisher College

Issues in Computer Ethics: Practical and Theoretical
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The Ethics of Online Counseling

An Examination of a Specific Case From a
Christian Computer Ethics Perspective

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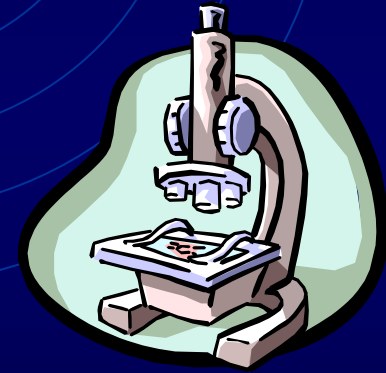


I. Introduction

- Internet stands as the foremost infrastructure
- The ethical issues that have been with us since the dawn of civilization have not dissipated
- Moral concerns – magnified by
 - Speed
 - Number of individuals affected by the Web

Introduction

- The new concerns that emerge from the complexity of the information age are actually the same moral issues
- Now seen under the magnification of technological lenses
- Concept of “harm”
 - Both traditional and online unethical actions
 - Not being truthful



Introduction

utilitarian approach

- Focus on
 - Pleasure
 - Consequences of actions
- Poor model
 - Consequences of the behavior on the Internet are not clear

Introduction

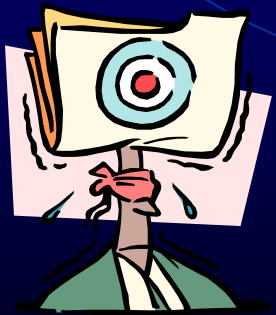
- Moral foundation based on virtue ethics
- Within framework of Natural Law
 - Solid normative foundation in contrast to the un-anchored utilitarian approach
 - Allows humankind to “naturally know” right from wrong
 - Part of our human nature

Introduction

- Natural Law works well for individuals outside the Christian community
- Christian view of Natural Law
 - Found in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas

Introduction

- Harm
 - Many opportunities for inflicting online harm
 - Web Counseling provides an example
 - Qualified professionals may be able to conduct online counseling effectively
 - Problematic issues arise when the client, who is in a very vulnerable position, is taken advantage of by unethical practices
 - Made easier by the nature of online human interaction



Introduction

- **Harm**
 - **Complicates both sides of the relationship**
 - Therapist is harmed
 - client provides false information
 - Time spent on pretended health concerns
- **Specific case on online counseling abuse**
 - Problematic issues
 - Representative of what occurs within the larger cyberspace context
 - Much broader implications for Computer Ethics

II. Philosophical Foundations: Virtue Ethics

- Aristotle
 - Foundation for moral decision-making
 - Mean between two vices
 - Practice of moderation
 - Establishment of habits
 - With stronger intellectual virtues

II. Philosophical Foundations Christian Virtue Ethics

- St. Thomas Aquinas 13th century
 - Influenced by Aristotle's work
 - Human law
 - Covering concrete situations
 - Derived from a set of self-evident truths that are known to all

II. Philosophical Foundations Christian Virtue Ethics

- Natural Law (Moral Law)
 - Uses concepts that are related to Aristotle's idea of virtues
 - Redefines the notion of moral virtues
 - Possible due to the rational participation of the eternal law of God
 - Applies to human choices

II. Philosophical Foundations Christian Virtue Ethics

- Christian Natural Law
 - Ten Commandments
 - Teaching of Christ
 - Provide the necessary ingredients for a more complete understanding of our Natural Law
 - In Online Counseling,
 - Golden Rule
 - Sound basis for making ethical decisions

II. Philosophical Foundations Christian Virtue Ethics

- Human dignity
 - Order and purpose
 - Ethical Decisions are resolved with greater level of certainty
 - Human dignity is the essence of character-based ethics
 - Deep within an individual
 - Extends outward
 - Human respect
 - Peer relationships
 - One's place in the world
- With a Christian worldview, Dignity is transformed into self-love
 - A high level of self-actualization

II. Philosophical Foundations

Christian Virtue Ethics

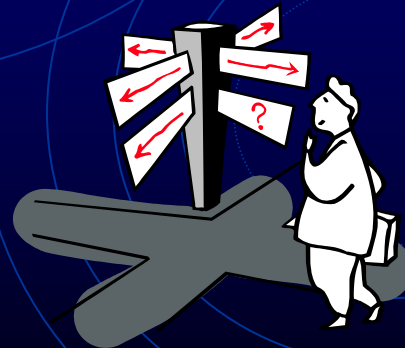
- Forms a normative foundation for viewing the particulars of Computer Ethics in light of a character-based philosophy

II. Philosophical Foundations Utilitarianism

- Modern society operates within a Utilitarian belief structure
- In the Tradition of
 - Epicurus (c. 341-271 BC)
 - Jeremy Bentham (1748 – 1832)
 - John Stuart Mill (19th century)
 - “Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness”

II. Philosophical Foundations Utilitarianism

- A very “fluid” standard of what is right and wrong
- Depends of the evaluation of the consequences of actions



II. Philosophical Foundations

Utilitarianism

- When the Internet is a factor
 - May be difficult to determine the consequences of a particular action
 - Magnitude of online participation
 - Speed of the Internet
 - Lack of control in stopping the spread of processes
 - Instances of harm can affect people at levels unimagined by the individuals who perpetrate unethical actions
 - Virus might do much more harm than was initially intended
 - Lack of both knowledge and control concerning the consequences of online actions forms the primary obstacle

II. Philosophical Foundations

- Use of a character-based philosophy makes sense
 - Criteria for ethical decision-making rests on a stable and universal platform
 - Allows individuals to let their natural inclinations, supported by Biblical revelation and Faith, to guide their actions instead of following the consensus of others



III. Specific Case in Online Counseling

Case Description

- *WebMD posting of July 24, 2000*
- A 31-year-old computer programming student, diagnosed with multiple personality disorder three years ago. "It scared the living life out of me," she says. Like many people with a new medical diagnosis, she turned to the Internet for information. What she found, she says, nearly drove her to suicide.

Case Description

- She first ran into problems when friends started telling her about a self-styled "psychoanalyst," who frequented chat rooms for abuse survivors and "multiples." Some women talked about going to his house for Froot Loops and ice cream.



Case Description

- When a friend said she was going to visit him, [the client] decided to check his credentials. "I knew that real therapists did not invite you to their homes," she says. "I talked to him on the phone and he told me he was a therapist, licensed in (two states). I called the licensing boards of those states and they had never heard of him."

Case Description

- Although [the client] knew he was not licensed, she says she was eager to listen to him because he told her that increasing her ability to function was more important than integrating her personalities -- something she wanted to hear. "He told me to give the various personalities time and let them do whatever they wanted. This was not good therapy. But he made it all sound so good."

Case Description

- Relying on the online "psychoanalyst," [the client] says she didn't get the professional help she really needed. Eventually, confused and depressed, she took an overdose of a tranquilizer. It wasn't enough to kill her, but the experience led her to check into a mental hospital where she finally began to get effective treatment.

Problematic Issues

- The Central Issue of Harm
 - Direct result of the unprofessional behavior of the therapist
 - Facilitated by the online nature of the interaction
 - People know deep down that harm is wrong
 - Human dignity is adversely affected
 - client was harmed when she did not get timely professional help due to untruthful actions
 - Harm is addressed by professional codes of ethics

Problematic Issues

- Licensure
 - Therapist was not truthful
 - Virtual experience contributed to this
 - Moor's Invisibility factor
 - Distance factor of the online experience
 - Difficult to verify the identity of parties involved
 - Professional credentials
 - Therapist focused on the consequences of his actions
 - If utilitarian ethics utilized,
 - Outcomes illustrate the shortcomings of utilitarian ethics

Problematic Issues

- Privacy
 - Concerning the initial discussions in this case, the use of chat rooms
 - Not the best way to maintain client privacy
 - Gave the client “False Hope”
 - Affected her dignity as a human being
 - Identity
 - Bi-directional concern: integrity of both client and mental health professional in important

Problematic Issues

- Harassment
 - The “At Home” invitations could have easily resulted in some form of harassment
 - The Motivation for providing free online counseling remains an interesting question
 - Charity of not charging seems suspect
 - Violated principle of privacy when he invited the clients into his home

Problematic Issues

- **Honesty**
 - Root of the problematic situation surrounding this case
 - Failure of the therapist to tell the truth about the licensure issue

Problematic Issues

- Quality of Service
 - Referrals – to qualified and trustworthy people
 - Therapist did not refer the client to qualified professionals
 - The relationship between the client and therapist deteriorated
 - Dignity of therapist was undermined by not telling the truth
 - Dignity of client was undermined by not receiving help
 - With universal truths of right and wrong
 - Relationship is strengthened
 - Client's dignity is maintained

IV. Concluding Remarks

- Ethical issues in this case are not unique
 - Appear throughout the cyber landscape
 - Harm, licensure, privacy, harassment, honesty...
 - Major focal points in Computer Ethics
 - Impact and scope of Internet has magnified their significance

IV. Concluding Remarks

- Prevailing foundation for judging right from wrong
 - Provides a poor normative framework
 - Results in a ever-changing set of standards
- Christian Natural Law foundation
 - Basis for solid character-based ethics
 - Navigate moral currents and make ethical decisions that are accordance with God's will
 - Issues associated with harm dissolve and Web becomes more attune to the needs of humanity

Question & Answer Session

- Thank You
- It has been a pleasure to be here at St.
John Fisher College