The Uniqueness of Computer Ethics and its Independence as an Ethical Discipline

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Factual Uniqueness of Computing Technologies

- Computers are:
  - Uniquely complex
  - Uniquely fast
  - Uniquely malleable
  - Uniquely cost effective
  - Uniquely adept at producing perfect digital copies.

Two Theses

- The factual uniqueness of computers does not imply that computer problems are unique in some meta-ethical, theoretical, epistemological, or qualitative sense.
- The legitimacy of treating computer ethics as a sub-discipline in applied ethics does not depend on its being unique in some meta-ethical, theoretical, epistemological, or qualitative sense.

Meta-Ethical Uniqueness

- Some acts in computer ethics cannot adequately be characterized by the concepts of obligatory, permissible, good, and supererogatory.

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- Factual uniqueness does not imply existing categories are inadequate for computer ethics.
  - Unique speed doesn't justify thinking existing categories are inadequate.
  - Factual uniqueness in many respects doesn't justify thinking existing categories are inadequate.

Normative Uniqueness

- Existing normative ethical theories or first-principles are inadequate to fully evaluate computer acts.

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  - Strong version: Certain problems involving computer usage are counterexamples that *refute* existing ethical theories.

Normative Uniqueness

- Two possibilities:
  - Strong version: Certain problems involving computer usage are counterexamples that *refute* existing ethical theories.
  - Weak version: Existing first-principles are logically indeterminate with respect to certain questions involving computer usage.

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- Factual uniqueness could not refute existing ethical theories. E.g. Kant's 2d Categorical Imperative.
- Factual uniqueness does not imply incompleteness of existing theories. E.g. Act utilitarianism.

Epistemological Uniqueness

- Computer technologies present unique ethical problems that resist the analogies that enable us to see how ethical theories and first-principles apply in other areas of applied ethics.

Epistemological Uniqueness

- Unique cost-effectiveness of computers makes possible utterly unprecedented acts:
  - E.g., Thief steals .5 cents a month from each of 100,000 accounts at negligible costs; makes $6000 over the course of a year without inflicting significant harm on the victims.

Epistemological Uniqueness

- Unique cost-effectiveness of computers
  - E.g., Thief steals .5 cents a month from each of 100,000 accounts.
- Analogies sufficient
  - Such crimes are more difficult without computers, but they are possible.
  - Crime's degree of difficulty morally irrelevant to assessment of ethical quality.

Qualitative Uniqueness

- Strong version: Computers have ethical properties unique among all entities in the universe.
- Weak version: Computers have some form of moral standing unique among non-living beings (e.g. moral personhood).

Qualitative Uniqueness

- Problem with strong version: No way to tell if computer technologies have utterly unique ethical properties.

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- Problem with strong version: No way to tell if computer technologies have utterly unique ethical properties.
- Problem with weak version: Simply implausible that computer technologies have some form of moral standing unique among non-living beings.

Disciplinary Uniqueness

- Ethical problems arising from computer use and technologies are distinguishable in principle from other areas of applied ethics and should be studied by applied ethicists as a class.

Relating the Uniqueness Claims

- Do any of the theoretical uniqueness claims imply that computer ethics should be treated as distinct sub-discipline of applied ethics?

Relating the Uniqueness Claims

- Meta-ethical uniqueness does not justify treating computer ethics as a sub-discipline of ***applied ethics.***

Relating the Uniqueness Claims

- Normative uniqueness does not justify treating computer ethics as a sub-discipline of ***applied ethics.***

Relating the Uniqueness Claims

- Epistemological uniqueness does justify treating computer ethics as a sub-discipline of applied ethics – but only to remedy the deficiency in ethical reasoning techniques.

Relating the Uniqueness Claims

- Weak qualitative claim that computer technologies have moral standing unique among non-living beings does not justify segregating computer ethics from other areas of applied ethics.
  - E.g., Can be joined with environmental ethics if computers have same moral standing as plants.

Relating the Uniqueness Claims

- Strong qualitative claim that computer technologies have utterly novel ethical properties implicate the competencies of meta-ethicists and theoretical ethicists, but not competencies of applied ethicists.

Justifying the Disciplinary Uniqueness of Computer Ethics

- Problems affect a special class of professionals.

Justifying the Disciplinary Uniqueness of Computer Ethics

How can we justify treating computer ethics as a distinct sub-discipline of applied ethics?

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- Problems affect a special class of professionals.
- Problems bear on interests vital to common well-being.

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- Problems affect a special class of professionals.
- Problems bear on interests vital to common well-being.
- Problems implicate difficult technologies that are more effectively studied by specialists.