Addressing the Central Problem in Cyber Ethics through Stories

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INTRODUCTION

The central problem in cyber ethics is not, as many might think, how to address the problems of protecting individual privacy, or preventing software piracy, or forcing computer programmers to take responsibility for the systems that they build. These are, of course, legitimate concerns of cyber ethics, but the central problem is how you decide what the right thing to do is with regard to these issues when the consequences of any responses cannot be known in advance. Stated more clearly, the central problem in cyber ethics is - how do you establish ethical standards in a professional field that is defined by a rapidly evolving technology where the consequences of the technology and the impact of any ethical standards cannot be known in the time frame in which the standards must be established? Stories play a very important role in addressing this issue. Specifically, stories provide a means of exploring ethical issues for which the full range of consequences is not currently known. But, in order to justify this claim, a few words of explanation are in order.

BACKGROUND

The word "story" means many different things to different people. For example, if one of your children tells you that your dog ate the neighbor's cat, you might challenge the veracity of this claim by asking – "Is that true, or is that just a story?" The implication is that there is truth and there are stories. And if it is a story, it cannot be true. But true versus fictitious is not the same as true versus false; and a story can contain important truths while still being wholly fictitious. If we are looking for precise intellectual truths, then perhaps stories are not the best medium for exploration. However, in areas where our understanding is unclear, either because we do not fully understand a phenomenon, or the phenomenon is not available for study because it exists in a possible world, stories play a very important role in advancing our understanding. To put a finer point on this argument, science and logic fail miserably at telling us what could be, or more importantly, what should be. In these two areas stories are powerful vehicles for intellectual explorations. A story, for the purposes of the current discussion, is a rendition or a telling of a series of true or fictitious events, connected by a narrative in which a set of characters experience and react to a set of actions or events and in doing so reveal something about the human character or condition. In order to see the value of stories for the exploration of issues in cyber ethics, three prior arguments must be made.

NARRATIVE VS. LOGICAL THINKING

Narrative and logical reasoning represent two distinct methods of making sense out of the world around us. They are both legitimate and both can be very rigorous (Bruner, 1986). Sometimes they provide alternative paths to truth and understanding. Sometimes one or the other provides the only path. Logical reasoning is general, context independent, objective and leads to a single conclusion. Narrative reasoning is specific, context dependent, open to subjective interpretation, and potentially leads to multiple conclusions. The characteristics of narrative reasoning are considered flaws when applied to logical reasoning. But the reverse applies also. A story that has only one interpretation and means the same to everyone is not much of a story. While narrative and logical reasoning are different kinds of reasoning, they are not mutually exclusive. A good narrative is also often quite logical in structure, and a good logical argument can often be better understood with a good narrative example. But for the most part, they are complimentary, alternative modes of thinking that provide different paths to truth and understanding.

To some extent, logical and narrative reasoning address different domains. Logic is well suited to mechanistic processes that can be reduced to logical description. Logic is good for articulating general principles and deductive reasons. Logic is useful for describing and explaining. While logic is good for describing "what is," narrative is good for exploring "what could be" and figuring out "what should be". Narratives are a useful means for understanding the complex and ambiguous issues in human affairs. They allow us to explore possibilities and experience situations vicariously. Narrative rea-

soning is particularly well suited to cyber ethics because many issues are not well understood and the goal of cyber ethics is not to discover truth about the physical world, but truth about human nature. Narrative fiction gives us a means to explore and discover truths about what could be and what should be. Through narratives we can explore possible consequences of technology, construct alternative worlds and select the one in which we would like to live.

Critics of the use of narrative in ethics point out that after exploring narratives you always have to come back to principles. Ethics, they argue, is too messy without principles and discussion of narratives does not lead to consistent conclusions. This view misses the point of narratives. First, principles are developed by extracting the principles from experience. Narratives provide some of these experiences vicariously. Hence, narratives can be used in the development of principles. Second, it is often unclear which principles apply in given situations. Narrative explorations provide insight into situations, allowing us to determine the governing principles. And narratives can be used to explore the consequences of principled decisions to determine if the outcomes are indeed what are intended. Finally, narrative reasoning does lead to conclusions - very specific conclusions about very specific situations. Narrative reasoning is lacking in generality, as was mentioned before, not lacking in conclusions.

THE ROLE OF EMOTION IN REASON

Most people believe that emotions have no role in logical reasoning. After all, reasoning should be dispassionate and free from emotional influences that may cloud our reasoning. And there is some basis for this. For example, if you lose your temper in the middle of an argument and start flinging personal insults at your opponent, rational people would not consider you as having advanced your position. Most would say that you lost the argument when you lost your temper. Yet emotions play an important role in reasoning and in order to understand this, we need to better understand exactly what emotions are.

There is considerable debate about the exact nature of emotions. The philosopher Robert Solomon (Solomon, 1994) offers one very useful observation that "emotions are judgments about the world". If you are walking down a path in the woods and it is getting dark, you might start to get a little nervous and walk a little faster. If you hear an unfamiliar noise or a rustling in the leaves your heart may begin to beat a little faster as you experience the emotional reaction of fear. This fear is a judgment about the world in which you have judged your current situation as unsafe. You did not arrive at this judgment through a rational process. Specifically, you did not think – "It is dark and hungry animals or possibly monsters come out when it is dark. I just heard a noise that I cannot identify and therefore there could be a hungry animal near me. If I walk a little faster, I might get away before the animal gets me. If I am wrong then all I have done is walked a little faster. If I am right, I might avoid being eaten. Hence, it is logical and reasonable for me to walk faster." In fact, you probably did not think at all. You just felt scared and increased your pace. If asked later why you were walking so quickly you might come up with a reasonable explanation. But that reasonable explanation is certainly constructed after the fact.

Perhaps we have conceded at this point that emotions are judgments about the world and that they can play an important role in reasoning. The obvious question is "So what?" Why do we care and why should we bother to make an effort to incorporate our emotional judgments into our reasoning? Damsio (1994) describes the case of a young man who after suffering damage to part of his brain was no longer able to feel emotions. The unexpected side effect of this malady was that he was also unable to make good decisions or assign importance to competing tasks. He seemed normal in every other way and seemed to have his intellectual facilities fully intact. Yet he seemed no longer able to feel emotions and as a result he was unable to function as a normal person. When we make a decision we evaluate alternatives. If we are unable to feel emotions we are unable to place values on the different alternatives. If we cannot place values on the different alternatives then there is no difference between the alternatives and decision-making becomes seriously flawed. Hence, without emotions rational decision-making may not be possible.

A good story about an ethical issue is much more likely to draw an emotional response that an intellectual one, whereas an abstract analysis is more likely to yield an intellectual response. Ultimately, ethical decisions are emotional decisions because they embody human values. For this reason, examining ethics from a purely rational perspective completely misses the point.

IMAGINATION AND POSSIBLE CONSEQUENTIALISM

One of the problems in establishing standards of ethical behavior in a field driven by technology is that the consequences of the technology and reactions to the technology often cannot be known. Looking to the past to provide guidance is ineffective because the past provides few clues. Marshall McLuhan is often attributed with the famous observation that looking to the past to