Chapter 7.1
Computer Ethics:
Constitutive and Consequential Morality

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces two distinct models of morality, namely, constitutive which is available in traditional moral philosophy and consequential which surrounds the present day computer ethics discourse. It shows how constitutive morality thoroughly rehearses possible problems arising out of new developments or introduction of new products before accepting a moral rule, whereas consequential morality, propelled by liberalism, allows freedom for new products without deliberation and attends to problems only when they arise. The chapter, looking from the point of view of constitutive morality, highlights some of the structural problems associated with computer ethics. In conclusion, it suggests how societies, like India, that are not fully modern, can learn from both of these two models, thereby instituting additional terms to a new discipline like computer ethics.

THE THREE FISH

A long time ago, there lived three fish in a lake. They were great friends, though each one's nature was quite different. The first fish was very wise. She always thought a lot before she did anything. She did not like to get into any kind of trouble. The second fish was extremely clever. She could make quick decisions, if the situation demanded it. It was easy for her to get out of any kind of trouble. The third fish was fatalistic. She believed in destiny, what had to happen would certainly happen, she believed.

One evening, while the wise fish was swimming about in the lake, she overheard two fishermen pointing towards her and saying, "Look at that big, fat fish. We must come back tomorrow to get her. I am sure there will be more like her in this lake." It was almost sunset and the fishermen were getting ready to leave. The wise fish rushed to her friends and informed them of the fishermen's plans

for the next day. Pondering over the issue for a while, the wise fish said, "We should leave this lake at once. Let us swim through the river and find a safe haven." The second fish said aloud, "Why must we leave now? Let the fishermen come here tomorrow. I will certainly make my escape then." The third fish was already resigned to fate, she said, "All my life I have lived in this lake. I cannot leave my home now. What is destined to happen will happen. So, I will stay here."

The wise fish bid farewell to her friends. Alone she swam through the river and found herself a new home in a pond. "Thank God I am safe," she thought to herself. Next morning, the fishermen arrived early. They spread their net and many fish got caught in it, including the two friends who had stayed back in the lake. Quickly, the clever fish thought of a plan to escape. Pretending to be dead, she lay absolutely still in the net. "Let's throw out this dead fish," said one fisherman and flung her back into the lake. "It worked! I am safe!" sighed the fish in relief. The third fish was still entangled in the net. She wriggled and twisted to get free, but to no avail. One fisherman got very irritated, "This fish here is real bothersome, I must put an end to it," so saying the fisherman chopped the third fish. (from Tales from Panchatantra)

INTRODUCTION

It is a social fact that the social space occupied by computers within Western developed societies is largely a modern secular social space which is, in turn, a product of series of continuous radical change within these societies. The project of modernity in the West has been largely successful in rejecting and even removing the pre-modern. However, the pre-modern social realities still exist in non-Western societies like India. This variance regarding the social fact, it is argued in this chapter, actively enters into the formation of the discourse of computer ethics in societies

like India. In order to argue for this variance, let me make some important historical connections and recall some genealogical trajectories, because what is present today is a result of active negotiations from the past.

This chapter begins by elucidating the basic maxims of the project of modernity within the modern West that clearly rejected and removed the pre-modern Western social realities, presents those sharp differences between moral frameworks of classical Western philosophy, termed here as *constitutive morality*, and modern Western morality, termed as *consequential morality*. In conclusion, this chapter shows how computer ethics in those societies which have not undergone the same historical developments as India, need not imitate the existing computer ethics discourse in the West, but can benefit from both these moral frameworks of the classical and the modern West, thereby adding new dimensions to the existing debates on computer ethics.

Modernity and Computers

The project of rejecting the pre-modern or tradition within the West by modernity is clearly evident in the writings of Rene Descartes, who is considered to be the father of modern philosophy. In his *Discourse on Method* (Descartes, 1985), while declaring his normative framework consisting of cogito, reason and certainty, he embarks on excluding the following:

- Childhood[1] (as it is the domain governed by appetite and teachers rather than reason)
- Language
- History (to him past is like travelling which takes us away from the present)
- Oratory, poetry (poetry is the "gifts of the mind rather than fruits of study" and "moral writings of the ancient pagans")
- "Customs," evolutionary growth of societies (he rejects gradual growth of societies)

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