

# De Facto Ethics Principles and Applications

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## INTRODUCTION

This article discusses cyberethics, i.e. how ethic norms are realized in virtual environments (Barney, 2004) and, in particular, how this happens on the Internet (Wessels, 2010). The authors of this article claim that there exists a contradiction between pragmatic rules and general justice or legislation. Many times the successful operations on the Internet are based on self-regulation. The definitions of cyberethics and self-regulation are discussed and compared to the principles of pragmatism and pragmatic ethics. The authors suggest that the prevailing values of the Internet are pragmatic by nature, and moral philosophy of this kind can be named *de facto* ethics (Mäkinen, 2008). The conceptual analysis on cyberethics rests on comparison.

## BACKGROUND

What is virtual ethics or cyberethics? Defining the topic is a cross-disciplinary project and related to such concepts as Internet ethics, self-regulation, game theory, plagiarism, mediation, trust and privacy, digital divide, democracy, anonymity, professional ethics, surveillance, and regulations related to freedom of speech, to name a few. These are common topics in publications related to Internet ethics (Edgar, 2003; Spinello, 1997; Spinello, 2000; Lessing, 1999; Wall, 2001; Nayar, 2010; Shaw, 2008; Wallach & Allen, 2008; Barney, 2004; Wessels, 2009; Nusselder, 2009; Smith & Wilson, 2010; Lanier, 2010; Ess, 2009).

While the speed of technological advances is very fast, ethical discussion concerning these issues seems to be lagging behind (Chester, 2007). While used

technology has already established itself as a part of normal everyday routines, it is still unclear what is right or wrong.

There are different kinds of responsibilities in all professions. The moral responsibility rests on moral norms, duties and obligations. Professional responsibility, instead, has to do with one's role as a professional – it, anyway, has to stay within the limits of what is morally allowed (van de Poel, 2011).

Efficiency is a well-liked concept among engineers and in business world as well because it is both simple and also easy to measure. From a moral point of view, effectiveness and efficiency are not always recommended because they do not take account of other values such as equity, justice, rightness, equality etc.

The Internet and IT are foundations for virtual life. They should not be mixed up with virtual life itself. IT applications are not ethical subjects but they can be useful, effective, fast and cheap. These qualities would not gain the upper hand. The Internet has also introduced some important immaterial values. Everything is not material, technical, and measurable. It may be that all the high hopes of the information (e.g. democracy) age have not been fulfilled. Some researchers like Salter (2003), say that the Internet grows apart from the ideals of free communication which were so typical in the beginning of the Internet era.

The goal of the philosophy is to clarify and simplify, to make phenomena transparent and unambiguous. The ethical questions are not over-complicated, they are often obscure and not seen because our everyday life does not require ethical or moral reflection.

Information ethics is only one many-sided area or ethics. Today, we also talk a great deal of environmental ethics, or ethical standards for juristic persons,

business enterprises, and communities. Sport ethics is a fairly topical issue at the moment. We are never completely free in an ethical sense. On the contrary, we must, constantly when we act, take individuals, norms of the society, values, and of course legislation into consideration (Mäkinen, Holmlund, & Mikkola, 2008).

## CATEGORIZATION OF GEORG HENRIK VON WRIGHT

In his study of ethics, von Wright defined morals so that he divided the moral good (goodness) into 6 categories: The instrumental and technical goodness, utilitarian and medical goodness and hedonic good are all good in instrumental sense – they can be treated as means. He also discerns moral goodness that is good as such, good for no particular reason. With this he means that good for somebody is intended for its own sake. Moral goodness can be compared with the moral responsibility. Von Wright's typology of the varieties of goodness helps us to discern and evaluate different kind of goodness, or things or matters that are valuable. Von Wright's categories are used here as a heuristic tool or model, not as a comprehensive account on ethics. (Von Wright, 1963)

Medical goodness, for instance, is connected with health and well-being. It can be said that our time favors everything that has to do with health. We should eat healthy food, do physical exercises regularly and look young forever. On the other hand, we are hysterical when the swine flu is approaching or the first wrinkles or lines appear on our faces. Utilitarian good means good that is distributed fairly. Taxation policy, for instance, is a means of achieving utilitarian goodness. The basic idea behind hedonistic thought is that pleasures like physical enjoyment, alcohol and delicacy, are the only things that are good for a person. (ibid)

Instrumental goodness is mainly attributed to implements, instruments, and tools – such as knives, watches, cars, mobile phones, laptops. The goodness called technical relates to ability or skill. Somebody, we say, is good at (doing) this or that. (Ibid) If we examine the Internet, it can be evaluated from different kind of goodness, different points of view.

## HABERMAS AND COMMUNICATIVE GOODNESS

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According to Habermas, there is a communicative void in the society. Habermas also says that communication is the most important barometer of democracy. According to his theory of discourse ethics, the more the people and institutions communicate in a society, the more efficiently democracy works. (Fultner, 2011; Salter, 2003)

Habermas uses the term public sphere instead of society: it is a space that mediates between the mass and the power elite; i.e. an arena in which power is formed and directed. (Cavanagh, 2007)

Habermas separates two ideal types of social action: the instrumental and the communicative. The instrumental action is rational form of action and it is focused on a formal calculation of the efficiency of an act in a relation to an end. Communicative action means instead a discourse the meaning of which is to gain mutual understanding and agreement. (Ibid)

It can be said that the Internet represents pluralism, competition between different opinions and genuine free public debate. And most important of all, it offers a foundation for interactivity. This may be the most important democratic value of the Internet.

Digitization has improved the possibilities of mass communication and entertainment (Mäkinen, 2008). On the one hand, virtual entertainment alienates people from real feelings. On the other hand, it is time-saving. Virtual entertainment is either spatially bound or bound to some place. It is apparent that entertainment is the main reason for the triumphal march of the Internet. So, the Internet is good in instrumental way because it is so effective. But here resides one contradiction. The Internet is also very effective when spreading bad influences. Questions of morals are to a large extent, questions of good, evil and duty (von Wright, 1963).

Habermas' communicative action is orientated towards mutual understanding. His idea of discourse ethics means that social agents should restore sufficient consensus in order to allow social actors to proceed in everyday activities (Cavanagh, 2007). Habermas accepts the plurality of values in the society so far as it stimulates practical discourse.

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