Chapter XXIII
The Public / Private Debate:
A Contribution to Intercultural Information Ethics

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ABSTRACT

In this article we give an overview of the range and characteristics of intercultural information ethics (IIE) focusing on the public/private debate in the so-called information age. IIE is a relatively newly emerging field which addresses a variety of issues such as similarities and differences of views on the public/private spheres in different cultural and social traditions, the comparative analysis of moral norms of communication in global information network(s) or the Seken-Shakai-Ikai trichotomy as a specific typology of structures underlying today's Japanese information society. We examine these problems, in particular the public/private debate, from a perspective in which cultural differences arise from the underlying dimension of sharing with others a common world and with special reference to the differences between Japanese and Western culture(s).

INTRODUCTION

Intercultural Information Ethics (IIE) deals with the impact of information and communication technology (ICT) on different cultures as well as on how specific ICT issues are understood from different cultural traditions. The main purpose of this chapter is to consider the range and characteristics of IIE focusing on the public/private debate as one of the most crucial issues in the so-called information age. IIE is a relatively newly emerging field which includes a variety of problems such as similarities and differences of views on the public and private spheres in different cultural and so-

cial traditions, the comparative analysis of moral norms of communication in global information network(s) (Capurro, 2006a; Capurro, Frühbauer, & Hausmanninger, 2007; Hongladarom & Ess, 2007; Sudweeks & Ess, 2004), differences of justifications of privacy as an intrinsic good in Western countries and as an instrumental good in Asian countries (Ess, 2005), cultural and historical backgrounds behind the difference between direct speech and indirect speech in the '*Far East*' and the '*Far West*' (Jullien, 1982, 1985, 1995; Capurro, 2006a), '*Seken-Shakai-Ikai*' trichotomy as a different typology of structures of the life-world in Japan of the information age depending on different perspectives on values and meanings of this world (Nakada & Tamura, 2005). According to the authors these problems are crucial for our lives in a common world where we are facing a danger reflecting split attitudes towards universalism and cultural relativism. We also believe that the consideration of these problems is tightly related with the understanding of our own existence, self-identity and mutual human relations. Therefore the analysis of cultural differences concerning for instance the public/private debate should not be divided from our attention to the perspective of a common shared world. In this respect, Heidegger's ontological conception of 'being-in-the-world' ('*In-der-Welt-sein*') (Heidegger ,1976) seems to us crucial for a transcultural understanding of what *being public* means in an ontological or structural sense as a basis for an intercultural dialogue on ethical issues of the information society (Nakada & Capurro, 2007). In this chapter we explore various conditions affecting people's understanding of public/private related problems on the basis of the world as a shared world openness with special regard of the differences between Japanese and Western culture(s).

THE PUBLIC/PRIVATE DEBATE FROM AN IIE PERSPECTIVE

The Problematization of Privacy

What is privacy? What are the relations between 'the public' and 'the private'? Contrary to the popular belief in undoubted acceptance of the concrete and stable definitions of 'the public' or 'the private', most of the scholars in the fields of IE (information ethics) or CE (computer ethics) may admit that the definitions in these respects somewhat or to a great extent remain ambiguous. In fact, the recent debates on the meanings of 'privacy' or the relations between 'the public and the private' in dominant academic journals such as *Ethics and Information Technology* seem to reflect this ambiguity of 'the public' and 'the private'. These recent debates include such as: (1) the debates on the natures of values consisting of the highly evaluated meanings of privacy ('the values of privacy are intrinsic ones or instrumental ones?') (Johnson, 1994; Rachels, 1975; Moor, 1989; Moor, 1997); (2) the debates on the validity or usefulness of the concepts of privacy in the information age ('the term "personal security" is better than the ambiguous term "privacy"?') (Thompson, 2001); (3) the debates on the validity of the presuppositions (such as subjectivity or individualism) behind 'privacy' in the age of everyday surveillance through IT (Lyon, 2001).

These debates about 'privacy' or 'the public and the private' reflecting the ambiguous meanings of these concepts endorse the necessity of discussions related to IE (information ethics). According to our own definition, IE means the *problematization of information morality* (Capurro, 2006b). In the process of '*problematization*' we try to doubt or reinterpret something at least superficially clear or undoubted. The debates cited above are some of the concrete examples of such *problematization* particularly with regard to 'privacy'. As one of the authors (Capurro) suggested elsewhere (Capurro, 1995, pp.97-114), the birth of philosophy

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