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Chapter III

Designing a Moral Dilemma Support System

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Abstract

Information technology may be able to help people become better ethical decision makers. This chapter explores philosophical and psychological issues underlying the design of a Moral Dilemma Support System (MDSS). The effects of schemas, decision strategies, social information, and emotions on dilemma analysis are considered. MDSS features that would help people understand moral dilemmas, choose a response, and explain analyses are identified.

Introduction

Most of the chapters in this book are about the unethical use of Information Technology (IT). This chapter addresses a different issue: using IT to help people make better ethical decisions. For the purposes of this chapter, "better"

does not refer to the particular action someone chooses in a situation, but to the process he or she uses to make the choice. People often disagree on what actions are morally right. However, most people would accept that someone who has thought deeply about a situation, considered who is affected, reflected on his or her own duties, and so on, will make a better choice than someone who makes a snap decision with little thought.

The chapter focuses particularly on issues underlying the design of a Moral Dilemma Support System (MDSS). An MDSS would help people structure their thinking about morally ambiguous situations. It would not tell people what they should do, but would make it easier for them to make better decisions. Just as a word processor can help authors write better stories, an MDSS's decision tools might help people make better ethical choices.

There's reason to think that systems for dilemma analysis could be worthwhile. There's considerable evidence that analyzing dilemmas improves people's moral reasoning ability (Schlaefli, Rest, & Thoma, 1985). Further, moral reasoning is an important precursor to ethical behavior (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). Finally, moral judgment is amenable to IT support.

Before building a system, it is important to know what it should do. That's what this chapter is about. Literature on ethical decision making is examined, with the goal of identifying the features an MDSS should have. The technical architecture of a system with these features is left for the future, as is testing its effectiveness.

The discussion makes some assumptions. First, MDSS users have access to appropriate technology, and possess basic literacy, technological, and abstract reasoning skills. This is not to dismiss the digital divide (Patterson & Wilson, 2000). However, it is important to investigate every approach to improving ethical reasoning, even those involving tools not available to the entire population. In fact, if IT can improve ethical choice, this is yet another argument for bridging the digital divide. Further, it is assumed that MDSS users *want* to make good decisions. If they do not, it will not matter how good the system is.

The final assumption is that competent adults have the right to make their own moral choices. This seemingly innocuous statement has important implications. People who think carefully about their lives — and this includes some IT designers — will have developed personal moral philosophies. This leads to the question: should designers promote their own ethical views when creating an MDSS? For example, I oppose radical relativism, the belief that morality is purely subjective. Should I ensure that anything I construct does not support radical relativism?