Is Information Ethics Culture-Relative?

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I examine whether information ethics is culture relative. If it is, different approaches to information ethics are required in different cultures and societies. This would have major implications for the current, predominantly Western approach to information ethics. If it is not, there must be concepts and principles of information ethics that have universal validity. What would they be? The descriptive evidence is for the cultural relativity of information ethics will be studied by examining cultural differences between ethical attitudes towards privacy, freedom of information, and intellectual property rights in Western and non-Western cultures. I then analyze what the implications of these findings are for the metaethical question of whether moral claims must be justified differently in different cultures. Finally, I evaluate what the implications are for the practice of information ethics in a cross-cultural context.

Keywords: *civil rights; computers and society; computing in developing countries; cultural differences; cultural pluralism; cultural values; global village; information ethics; intellectual property rights; privacy cultural imperialism; social norms; social issues*

INTRODUCTION

Information ethics[1] has so far mainly been a topic of research and debate in Western countries, and has mainly been studied by Western scholars. There is, however, increasing interest in information ethics in non-Western countries like Japan, China, and India, and there have been recent attempts to raise cross-cultural issues in information ethics (e.g., Ess, 2002; Gorniak-Kocikowska, 1996; Mizutani, Dorsey & Moor, 2004). Interactions between scholars of Western and non-Western countries have brought significant differences to light between the way in which they approach issues in information ethics. This raises the question whether different cultures require a different information ethics and whether concepts and approaches in Western information ethics can be validly applied to the moral dilemmas of non-Western cultures. In other words, is information ethics culturally relative or are there concepts and principles of information ethics that have universal validity? The aim of this essay is to arrive at preliminary answers to this question.

MORAL RELATIVISM AND INFORMATION ETHICS

In discussions of moral relativism, a distinction is commonly made between descriptive

and metaethical moral relativism. *Descriptive moral relativism* is the position that as a matter of empirical fact, there is extensive diversity between the values and moral principles of societies, groups, cultures, historical periods, or individuals. Existing differences in moral values, it is claimed, are not superficial but profound, and extend to core moral values and principles. Descriptive moral relativism is an empirical thesis that can in principle be supported or refuted through psychological, sociological, and anthropological investigations. The opposite of descriptive moral relativism is *descriptive moral absolutism*, the thesis that there are no profound moral disagreements exist between societies, groups, cultures, or individuals. At issue in this essay will be a specific version of descriptive moral relativism, *descriptive cultural relativism*, according to which there are major differences between the moral principles of different cultures.

Much more controversial than the thesis of descriptive moral relativism is the thesis of metaethical moral relativism, according to which the truth or justification of moral judgments is not absolute or objective, but relative to societies, groups, cultures, historical periods, or individuals.[2] Whereas a descriptive relativist could make the empirical observation that one society, polygamy, is considered moral whereas in another it is considered immoral, a metaethical relativist could make the more far-reaching claim that the statement "polygamy is morally wrong" is true or justified in some societies while false or unjustified in others. Descriptive relativism therefore makes claims about the values that different people or societies actually have, whereas metaethical relativism makes claims about the values that they are justified in having. Metaethical moral relativism is antithetical to *metaethical moral absolutism*, the thesis that regardless of any existing differences between moral values in different cultures, societies, or individuals, there are moral principles that are absolute or objective, and that are universally true across cultures, societies, or individuals. Metaethical moral absolutism would therefore hold that the statement "polygamy is morally

wrong" is either universally true or universally false; it cannot be true for some cultures or societies but false for others. If the statement is true, then societies that hold that polygamy is moral are in error, and if it is false, then the mistake lies with societies that condemn it.

The question being investigated in this essay is whether information ethics is culturally relative. In answering this question, it has to be kept in mind that the principal aims of information ethics are not descriptive, but normative and evaluative. That is, its principal aim is not to describe existing morality regarding information but rather to morally evaluate information practices and to prescribe and justify moral standards and principles for practices involving the production, consumption, or processing of information. A claim that information ethics is culturally relative therefore a claim that metaethical moral relativism is true for information ethics. It is to claim that the ethical values, principles, and judgments of information ethics are valid only relative to a particular culture, presumably the culture in which they have been developed. Since information ethics is largely a product of the West, an affirmation of the cultural relativity of information ethics means that its values and principles do not straightforwardly apply to non-Western cultures.

But if the cultural relativity of information ethics depends on the truth of metaethical relativism, does any consideration need to be given to descriptive relativism for information ethics? This question should be answered affirmatively. Defenses of metaethical relativism usually depend on previous observations that descriptive relativism is true. If descriptive relativism is false, it follows that people across the world share a moral framework of basic values and principles. But if this is the case, then it seems pointless to argue for metaethical moral relativism: why claim that the truth of moral judgments is different for different groups if these groups already agree on basic moral values? On the other hand, if descriptive relativism is true, then attempts to declare particular moral principles of judgments to be universally valid come under scrutiny. Exten-

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