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So-called "applied philosophy" has been something of a growth industry over the last decade. There has been a rapid proliferation of journals, books, conferences, and so on, devoted to medical ethics, animal rights, philosophy of ecology, philosophy of sport, business ethics, and philosophy of sex and love. The most recent addition to this growth industry is "computer ethics". In this paper I will defend the curmudgeonly thesis that there is no such subject as computer ethics. Specifically, it is my view that while computers may, or may not, be of professional interest to epistemologists and metaphysicians, they should be of no particular interest to moral theorists.

Let me draw what I think is the crucial distinction in these matters, viz., a distinction between what is of direct and what is of merely indirect concern to philosophers. I say something is of indirect concern to philosophers if it merely serves as an occasion for philosophic inquiry into what is of direct concern. What is of direct concern is a matter I shall discuss below.

Pretty clearly, anything can be of indirect concern to philosophers, because anything can be an occasion for philosophic thought. The lowly cheeseburger can be an occasion for philosophy, since it might prompt someone to wonder on what basis he knows the bread is nutritious rather than poisonous, and thus to face an issue of direct philosophic interest (to wit, the problem of induction). Similarly, a particularly vivid nightmare might possibly be an occasion for philosophy, and may actually have been the occasion for the *Meditations* of Descartes.

The striking thing to note about things that are merely of indirect interest to philosophy is that while they are sufficient to prompt direct philosophic inquiry, they are never necessary for that inquiry. Returning to our humble cheeseburger, we see that while it may well be the start of my philosophic reflection, a hot dog, a real dog, or a prairie dog would serve as well. What is directly relevant is the problem of induction; what is of only indirect interest is the historical occasion for the inquiry. Dispensability is the mark of indirectness.

I don't mean the distinction between direct and indirect interest to be some kind of profound or absolute distinction. But it is useful enough to help understand the issue at hand. Let's take a clear ease. I trust that not even the trendiest of philosophers would want to see a specialty spring up called "The Philosophy of Automobiles". But why not? The answer clearly has to do with the indirectness of the ways automobiles lead to philosophic inquiry. A car crash

which injures people brings up the problem of evil, but so does a boat or a plane crash. A car crash that leaves the driver clinically brain dead brings up the mind/body problem, but so does brain damage caused by falling off a log. Automobiles create pollution which threatens (so it is claimed) the delicate ecosystem, but so does the pollution from power plants and volcanos. The genuine philosophic issues that arise from the usage of automobiles are only very indirectly related to automobiles.

What, then, is of direct concern to philosophers? To give a precise characterization of that would require considerable meta-philosophical theorization, far beyond what is needed here. Suffice it to say that the traditional concerns of philosophy are clearly, indeed paradigmatically, of direct interest to philosophers. Of direct interest to moral philosophers are the concepts of right, just, good, and virtuous, and the judgments people make concerning the application of those concepts. Typically, the moral philosopher attempts to construct, elaborate, or criticize a theory which captures the broadest range of true judgments in a given domain. Computer ethics (as well as other "applied" ethical disciplines) does not involve broad-based theory construction, and we would do well to consider why.

With those preliminary remarks out of the way, let us turn to the main issue. Are there any aspects of computers that are of reasonable direct interest to moral theorists? Several such aspects have been mentioned: the dangers posed by computers to our privacy; the responsibility or liability of computer programmers for damage caused by their software, along with questions of property rights for software designers; and finally, the threat of dehumanization wrought by computers and (specifically) robots. We need to look closely at each of these to see whether any ethical issues are directly (not merely indirectly) involved. The answer, I will suggest, is no.

*Computers and Social Relationships*

A number of writers have raised alarms about the possible negative impact of computers upon our social relationships. For instance, Sherry Turkle (in *The Second Self*) has troubled us with descriptions of fanatic hackers, who spend all their waking moments glued to computers and are utterly unable to have normal social intercourse with their fellow beings. And a number of writers have expressed the fear that Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI) will rob children of the necessary interaction with their teachers and stunt their emotional growth.

I find such concerns hyperbolic and premature. Hackers are like any other people totally absorbed in an avocation or vocation. Scholars often spend *their* waking hours reading and writing books on a tiny area (say, the history of the Trucial States), yet nobody makes a big deal about *that*. Scholars often wind up being socially inept yet manage to get along reasonably well and usefully in society. As for CAI, it has all the earmarks of an educational fad: heavy on hype, light on results. Computers hardly seem likely to replace teachers, despite what the computer magazines say.

But even if the doubts are not exaggerated, my point here is that they are not of direct philosophic interest. Television has had a vastly wider impact on young people, one much more clearly harmful to their social and intellectual (not to mention aesthetic!) growth, but that hardly makes television of direct philosophic importance.

*Computers and Privacy*

The aspect of computers which is perhaps most frightening to the average person is the threat computers seem to pose to privacy. One indication of the depth of popular interest is the fact that one of the most popular investigative reporters around today, David Burnham, confidante of Serpico and Silkwood, has written a best-selling book on the subject (*The Rise of the Computer State*). We all know that a significant amount of information about us is kept on various computer tapes. It is now possible to track a person's movements by looking at "transaction records" (of phone calls, car and hotel room rentals, meals charged, etc.). TRW and other credit agencies keep track of who pays bills and who does not. The microprocessors in some cars can tell the dealer how many times the car has been driven over the recommended maximum speed or started with warning lights on. Medical records are being computerized.

Again, my reply is twofold: these fears are exaggerated, and in any case that computers are only tangentially involved in the issue of privacy. To begin with, computers can enhance privacy as well as diminish it. Microprocessor-controlled detectors allow us to leave the college library without having to have our briefcases searched (as was once required). Computerizing records, especially medical records, can dramatically increase their security and hence increase the privacy of the people whose data is contained therein, and even where privacy is diminished, a commensurate gain in other freedoms may result. For instance, computer-controlled equipment for searching passengers may diminish their privacy, but increase their freedom of mobility (by decreasing the chance of hijacking).

But again, suppose computers do indeed threaten privacy and even that they do so in a way not compensated for by gains in other freedoms. What makes that directly relevant to philosophy? It is clearly true that privacy is a philosophic issue. But computers only add one more possible technology to a wide panoply of existing technologies that pose a threat to privacy: radio-transmitting devices (hidden microphones); standard cameras; television cameras; fingerprint files; spy satellites and even spy helicopters; and so on. Here as before, computers are not of direct relevance.

*Software Ownership and Liability*

Some writers have felt that issues surrounding the ownership of and liability for software are of direct relevance for philosophy. For instance, Johnson and Snapper in their recent anthology *Ethical Issues in the Use of Computers*[*3*](#bookmark86)include sections of readings on responsibility for software errors and property rights of software designers.

But it is very unclear why computers are particularly relevant to the philosophic issues of property rights and responsibility. The usual response from those who believe in computer ethics is to sketch an interesting scenario or two where responsibility for software errors is ill-defined. For example, imagine a case where a team of computer programmers designs a program that controls the administration of radiation to cancer patients and the program has a bug in it which is detected only after a patient has been harmed by an overdose of radiation. Who is to blame (it is asked provocatively): the hospital, the computer company, or the programmer who actually made the design error?

Does answering such a question really directly involve philosophic inquiry? If so, then a similar sort of point could be made about automobiles. Suppose a person buys a car with

defectively designed emergency brakes. He parks the car on a hill, and while he is buying a cheeseburger the emergency brakes give way, and the car rolls over a bystander. As before, it is a nice question indeed, who is liable (the owner? car dealer? manufacturer?) But does that mean we should write about "Ethical Issues in the use of Automobiles"? Hardly. The questions in such cases are purely legal ones, which is, of course, not to deny their importance or trickiness. And one notes that many of the selections in the Johnson and Snapper book are from law journals.

A similar point obtains regarding property rights and software. There is very little there of direct philosophic importance, although copyright and patent lawyers have much difficult (and lucrative) work to do. Who owns software designed by a company, and under what conditions should individuals be allowed to copy it? One may ask in reply: who owns the "product" (i.e., the movie) put on a videotape, and under what conditions should they be allowed to copy it? I am not denying that these are economically vital legal questions. I am denying that they are, in any interesting sense, philosophical questions.

*Computers and Dehumanization*

We all have seen or at least heard about Fritz Lang's classic *Metropolis*, a movie which depicts a totally dehumanized world. We also all have seen any number of movies in which malign computers attempt to take over the planet, from HAL in *2001* to Colossus in *The Forbin Project*. As usual, movies tend to present, in a vivid and exaggerated way, concerns shared by a

1. Johnson, Deborah and John Snapper, *Ethical Issues in the Use of Computers*, Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth Pub. Co., 1985.

large portion of the public. Critics have suggested that computers are dehumanizing people, replacing wisdom and judgment by calculation of subjective utilities or whatever. (This is a point made by David Burnham, Joseph Weizenbaum and others).

But again, where is the new philosophy in all of this? It is indeed an interesting question whether man is just a machine, but that question was more occasioned by the Scientific Revolution of the 17th century than by recent computer developments. It is indeed an interesting question whether judgment can be replaced by calculation, but that question was more occasioned by the rise of classical economics and mathematical statistics than by computers. It is indeed an interesting question whether machines are dehumanizing and alienating people, but that question was occasioned more by the industrial revolution than by recent trends in robotics.

*A Possible Criticism*

I can imagine some readers thinking to themselves, "Jason's set up a straw man here. Of course, computers and computerization aren't themselves of direct philosophic importance; rather, the philosophy of computers is really the use of philosophy to understand the impact of computers on our lives. People trained in academic philosophy have much to add to that discussion." So, for instance, Deborah Johnson (in *Computer Ethics*) attempts to utilize classical theories of moral obligation (e.g., utilitarianism, Kantianism, and so on) to help understand such things as privacy, the status of professional codes of ethics, and so on.

But I am skeptical of this weaker view of computer ethics as well. For it seems to me that the social impact of computers is better studied by social science than philosophy. Consider, for example, the professional codes of ethics of various organizations of computer scientists (such as the Association for Computing Machinery) Such codes contain rules markedly at variance with actual professional practice, such as proscriptions against a consultant over-representing his expertise (whereas, in reality, the consultant who is most modest is least employed!). In

Johnson's book, such codes are "justified" by showing that the rules accord with utilitarian and Kantian moral theories. (Oddly enough, no attempt is made to show that those codes accord with the principles of Ethical Egoism!). But does this really help us understand such professional codes? Hardly.

To understand why such codes exist, we must get clear on the purposes they serve—for example, whether the association is promulgating the code of ethics to improve its public image, or achieve higher salaries for its members. But that is an exercise in political science, not moral philosophy. And to understand why such codes should be followed—assuming that they should be followed requires only common moral intuition.

Perhaps it might be said that the role of moral philosophy with regard to professional codes of ethics is to help professionals become more ethical. Under this view, computer ethics (or applied ethics more generally) is rather like psychotherapy or education—a professionally trained ethicist helps his clients become more ethical. But I am skeptical. It seems to me that what inclines a doctor truly to care about his patients, or an engineer/computer specialist sincerely to want his creations to help people, or a salesman genuinely to want to be honest with his customers, is not some professional code of ethics, or advice from Ph.D.'s in philosophy. Instead, it is a set of values either inculcated at an early age (typically in the context of religious training) or else innately present. If those codes of values are present, codes of professional ethics are obvious. If those values are absent, those codes are ineffective.

*Conclusion*

I fear that the reader may misunderstand what I am saying. Let me point out a few things I am not saying.

First, I am not denying that there is some kind of "computer revolution" going on. The computer is having a significant impact upon society. So has the automobile, television, radio, DDT, penicillin, nuclear weapons, motion pictures, contraceptives, and so on. Whether computers will have the profound impact on society that the printing press or the assembly line have had remains to be seen, however. The point is, though, that not everything of great social importance is of great philosophic importance.

Second, I am not saying that moral theorists should not write essays about the social impact of computers. All men and women of letters should be encouraged to write on whatever topic they feel is important. Just don't call it philosophy, or pretend that training in ethics gives one any special expertise in the legal or social issues surrounding computers.

Third, I don't deny the possibility that computers may be directly relevant to metaphysics and epistemology. I am agnostic on that score. After a great deal of work on the question of whether machines can think, I'm not sure that much has emerged which helps answer the mind/body problem. I suspect—but only suspect—that the question of whether microchips can think is no less puzzling than the question of whether neural tissue can think. And while I suspect research in Artificial Intelligence may have some direct epistemological relevance, that point is not at all clear (as Herbert Dreyfus has argued so vigorously). But whether or not computers are directly relevant to metaphysics and epistemology, they are not directly relevant to moral theory.

One last point is worth noting. A colleague of mine, who specializes in the social impacts of computing, when she heard my skeptical ruminations about computer ethics, replied "Then what is philosophy good for?” That is a fair question, and we would do well to think about it for

a moment. For this sort of feeling (that for philosophy to be valuable, it must be applicable to the various realms of daily life) seems to lie behind much of the demand for "applied ethics”.

I do not believe that philosophy is valuable only to the extent that it is "relevant". Philosophy has both intrinsic and instrumental value. Intrinsically, it is simply good that we understand our moral judgments, that we organize them and search for deeper principles that underlie them. Theorization in ethics (or philosophy more generally) is no less inherently worthwhile than theorization in natural or social science.

Instrumentally, philosophy has value in a way not understood by those who ask for relevance. Getting clear on how we universalize moral maxims, for example, gives us great insight into human judgment, and that may well be useful in artificial intelligence. That is, Kantian moral theory may be instrumentally valuable irrespective of whether it can be directly "applied" to "justify" some professional code of ethics.

So it is that my skepticism about computer ethics does not grow out of a feeling that ethics as a discipline is useless. It is inherently good and practically useful—but not in the naive way envisioned by people who seek to "apply" it as they would some engineering technique. Philosophy is, in the end, a Humanistic enterprise: it is about understanding, not application.

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