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Review: The plurality of moral challenges in information societies and the need for systematic thinking

Abstract:

This paper shall give a review of some recently published and some older books, which were published as second or third edition, on Information Ethics and Internet related topics:

- Brennan, Linda L. & Victoria E. Johnson (eds.): Social, Ethical, and Policy Implications of Information Technology. Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing, 2004. – 304 pages, paperback, \$59.95
- Capurro, Rafael: Ethik im Netz. Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 2003. 278 pages, paperback, €26.00
- Cavalier, Robert J. (ed.): The impact of the Internet on our moral lives. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005. – 249 pages, paperback, \$26.95
- Johnson, Deborah G.: Computer Ethics. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, third edition, 2001. – 240 pages, paperback, \$40.67
- Kuhlen, Rainer: Informationsethik. Umgang mit Wissen und Informationen in elektronischen Räumen. Konstanz: UVK (UTB), 2004. – 444 pages, paperback, €24.95
- Nyíri, Kristóf: Vernetztes Wissen. Philosophie im Zeitalter des Internets. Wien: Passagen Verlag, 2004. – 179 pages, paperback, €19.95
- Spinello, Richard A.: Case Studies in Information Technology Ethics. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, second edition, 2003. – 252 pages, paperback, \$54.67
- Spinello, Richard A. & Herman T. Tavani (eds.): Readings in Cyberethics. Sudbury, NJ: Jones and Bartlett Publishers, second edition, 2004. – 697 pages, paperback, \$54.95
- Tavani, Herman T.: Ethics & Technology. Ethical Issues in an Age of Information and Communication Technology. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2004. 344 pages, paperback, \$53.95

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- Relevant publications:
 - Karsten Weber: Das Recht auf Informationszugang. Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2005.
 - Guest editor (together with Rafael Capurro) of CSI (Computer Society of India) Communications special issue "Informatics and Ethics", June 2005.
 - Digitale Spaltung? Informationsgerechtigkeit! In: Rupert M. Scheule, Rafael Capurro, Thomas Hausmanninger (Hrsg.): Vernetzt gespalten. Der Digital Divide in ethischer Perspektive. München: Fink, 2004.

First of all, I have to thank the authors and publishers of the books that are reviewed here. Without hesitation, all of them responded to my email request for a copy of their works by sending them immediately – most of them right across the Atlantic. Obviously, a non-profit organization like the ICIE and our e-journal IRIE would not be possible without such generosity. Such support realizes what is meant when we talk about our *scientific community*. The opportunities, which technologies such as the Internet provide, to communicate immediately, fast, and cheaply, have already had an impact to our moral lives. These possibilities alter our sense of obligation to one another.

But let us take a more pragmatic approach. The books that are reviewed here could be categorized in several ways. One category is that of anthologies: the works by Linda L. Brennan and Victoria E. Johnson, Rafael Capurro, Robert J. Cavalier, Richard A. Spinello & Herman T. Tavani, and Kristóf Nyíri are all anthologies. Capurro's and Nyíri's books contain collections of their own texts previously published in journals and elsewhere. The books by Brennan and Johnson, Spinello and Tavani, and Cavalier contain many important and often cited essays (in Cavalier and in Spinello and Tavani) or chapters (in Brennan and Johnson) on information ethics, policy implications, moral challenges and social impacts of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and so on.

in contrast to the categories above, one will find the monographs of Deborah G. Johnson, Rainer Kuhlen, Richard Spinello, and Herman T. Tavani. These books are conceived as textbooks that would provide an introduction to students of the field of information ethics and to ICT-related social and ethical questions.

However, Brennan and Johnson's as well as Spinello and Tavani's collection of chapters or essays on ICT-related social and ethical questions could also be used as introduction into the field. Therefore, a second category could be mentioned: books that address experts in their respective fields of research.

A third possible categorization is that of language. The books of Rafael Capurro, Rainer Kuhlen and Kristóf Nyíri are written in German (noting that Capurro's work contains some chapters written in English). All the other books are written in English. However, all the categorizations delineated above are more or less formal and do not take into account the content of the reviewed books. That shall be done now.

I will begin with those monographs that were conceived as textbooks. All authors (Deborah Johnson, Kuhlen, Spinello, and Tavani) included a chapter or a couple of pages in their books where they provide some considerations why it is necessary to think about ICT in social, political or moral terms. Some even provide a rough introduction to ethical theories. For instance, in the first two chapters of his work Rainer Kuhlen briefly tries to summarize existing ethical approaches and theories, to sketch their relations to information ethics, and to connect conceptions of human rights to the objectives of information ethics. However, in the rest of his book these ethical approaches and theories only appear occasionally, unsystematically, and poorly integrated. Kuhlen presents a couple of major conflicts arising by the use of ICT, introduces the different groups affected by ICT, and shows several lines of argumentation within the conflicts of those groups. His approach is descriptive without normative considerations.

Unfortunately, the link between basic ethical positions and reflections on ethical problems related to ICT more or less is missing in all the books that are reviewed here. Sometimes that is no big thing: Richard Spinello provides in his book a collection of case studies in which he describes the respective problem, the different parties who are involved, the interests of those parties, and so on. The book is descriptive – Spinello does not (want to) offer a normative point of view. Therefore, it seems to be sufficient for Spinello to point out why those cases could be considered from the viewpoint of ethics, politics, or law without indicating how that could be done. But the textbooks of Deborah Johnson and Herman Tavani emphasize ethical questions. However, there is no strong link between basic ethical positions and the described issues although it would be quite interesting to know what kind of results would emerge, for instance, from, an utilitarian calculus in comparison to those that would arise from deontological considerations or in contrast to ethical positions that stress justice and fairness. Yet, although all reviewed textbooks have to be criticized with respect to the lack of normative considerations, it is important to note that there is a particular problem with Kuhlen's book, because he presents his own point of view in an apodictic way without giving reasons for it to the reader. The other authors are more restrained with regard to their own moral verdicts. Especially in case of textbooks for students it is very important to argue carefully – students have to learn ethical argumentation and they have to learn that any claim has to be estab-

lished with arguments and not with dogmas or mere opinion.

Richard Spinello and Herman Tavani's anthology is conceived a little bit differently than the others. They decided to identify a couple of ICT-related problems and to write an introductory chapter for each problem which contains discussion questions, references and suggestions for further readings. Subsequently, each problem is discussed by several other authors. Now, some of them tried to establish a link between basic ethical positions and the treated question and some did not. However, because each chapter contains a number of essays, readers will have the opportunity to learn about several different viewpoints. That approach seems to be the great advantage of Spinello and Tavani's textbook compared to the other ones. The conception of Linda Brennan and Victoria Johnson's anthology is quite similar, but there is no introductory part and for every ICT-related topic the reader only finds one chapter.

Finally, the anthology of Robert Cavalier brings together a couple of essays that seem to have a common viewpoint: he mentioned that the authors of his anthology based their essays on Aristotelian foundations, which mean that all of them try to show that the moral challenges of the Internet only can be met with moral virtues as articulated by Aristotle and those whom he influenced. However, even for non-Aristotelians, all chapters of Cavalier's book are quite interesting because they highlight historical aspects and ideas about the Internet not that common in the usual debates.

Even leaving out the consideration of the language of the work, Rafael Capurro's and Kristóf Nyíri's books are somehow different compared to the other anthologies because they summarize their own previously published essays. Additionally, regarding the content, there is another difference: Capurro's and Nyíri's aim seems not to be to solve ethical problems that occur in real life but to try to establish some theoretical foundations of information ethics and other ICT-related problems. For example, both muse about Heidegger's philosophy and about the possibilities of adopting Heideggerian ideas for recent ICT-related moral and metaphysical questions.

Capurro's and Nyíri's books are quite good examples for what often is called "continental philosophy"; the other books that were reviewed here tend to be more analytical. But that should not be understood as pejorative; both kinds of thinking are important

to deal with "the impact of the Internet on our moral lives", as Robert Cavalier calls it. But there is still a lot of work to be done. Theoretical considerations are quite important for a better understanding of the field, but it is necessary to link them to practise. And the other way round is also important: case studies and moral advice are important, too. But without foundation of moral claims and without their justification such claims easily can be rejected. To make this point more clear, let me suggest one example: the digital divide and free access to information. That is a problem within nation-states and a problem that transcends the borders of nation-states. Even in the context of a single society it is necessary to justify claims of free access to information for everybody. If we do not provide such justification there will be a confrontation in case of proprietary versus non-proprietary software (Open Source, Free Software), of intellectual property conflicts, or even in case of privacy debates. In all these cases often it seems that the opponents just raise claims without justification – and often it seems that those claims could not be justified without heavy contradictions and inconsistencies.

Therefore, let me end this review with a remark. In the field of ICT-related research, particularly in case of raising normative claims, we still are standing at the beginning of work that yet has to be done. The diversity and immense number of moral challenges in information societies both ask for more efforts in systematic thinking as well as in creating links between theoretical musings and practical work.

In summary, depending on your expectations and needs anyone of the reviewed books can be recommended. As textbooks I would prefer Deborah G. Johnson's text or Richard Spinello and Herman T. Tavani's book but all other publications are informative as well. There is only one point of critique left: the price of some of the reviewed books is relatively high, particularly with regard to the fact that all of them are paperback editions. Perhaps the publishers should think about the price again, especially in those cases a book is published as second or even third edition.