Is Information Ethics Culture-Relative?

ABSTRACT

In this essay, it will be examined 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 nonwestern cultures. It will then be analyzed what the implications of these findings are for the metaethical question of whether moral claims must be justified differently in different cultures. Finally, it will be evaluated what the implications are for the practice of information ethics in a cross-cultural context.

Keywords: Information Ethics; Computers And Society; Cultural Values; Cultural Differences; Cultural Pluralism; Cultural Imperialism; Social Norms; Social Issues; Global Village; Computing In Developing Countries; Privacy; Intellectual Property Rights; Civil Rights

1. Introduction

Information ethics[i] 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 nonwestern countries like Japan, China and India, and there have been recent attempts to raise cross-cultural issues in information ethics (e.g., Mizutani, Dorsey and Moor, 2004; Ess, 2002; Gorniak-Kocikowska, 1996). Interactions between scholars of Western and nonwestern 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 nonwestern cultures. In other words, is information ethics culture-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.

2. 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

1

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.[ii] 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 culture-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 culture-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 culture-relativity of information ethics means that its values and principles do not straightforwardly apply to nonwestern cultures.

But if the culture-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. Extensive justification would be required for any attempt to adopt a particular moral framework (say, Western information ethics) as one that is universally valid. In the next section, I will therefore focus on the question whether there are good reasons to believe that there are deep and widespread moral disagreements about central values and principles in information ethics across cultures, and whether therefore descriptive cultural relativism is true for information ethics.

3. The Descriptive Cultural Relativity of Information-Related Values

In this section, I will investigate the descriptive cultural relativity of three values that are the topic of many studies in information ethics: privacy, intellectual property and freedom of information. Arguments have been made that these values are distinctly Western, and are not universally accepted across different cultures. In what follows I will investigate whether these claims seem warranted by empirical evidence. I will also relate the outcome of my investigations to discussions of more general differences between Western and nonwestern systems of morality.

How can it be determined that cultures have fundamentally different value systems regarding notions like privacy and intellectual property? I propose that three kinds of evidence are relevant:

(i) *conceptual*: the extent to which there are moral concepts across cultures with similar meanings. For example, does Chinese culture have a concept of privacy that is similar to the American concept of privacy?

(ii)   *institutional:* the extent to which there is similarity between codified rules that express moral principles and codified statements that express moral judgments about particular (types of) situations. For example, are the moral principles exhibited in the laws and written rules employed in Latin cultures on the topic of privacy sufficiently similar to American laws and rules that it can be claimed that they embody similar moral principles?

(iii)   *behavioral:* the similarity between customs and behaviors that appear to be guided by moral principles. This would include tendencies to avoid behaviors that are immoral regarding a moral principle, tendencies to show disapproval to those who engage in such behaviors and to show disapproval to those who do not, and tendencies to show remorse or guilt when engaging in such behaviors. For instance, if a culture has a shared privacy principle that states that peeking inside someone's purse is wrong, then it can be expected that most people try not to do this, disapprove of those who do, and feel ashamed or remorseful when they are caught doing it.

It is conceivable that in a particular culture a value or moral principle is widely upheld at the behavioral level, but has not (yet) been codified at the institutional and conceptual level. But this is perhaps unlikely in cultures with institutions that include extensive systems of codified rules, which would include any culture with a modern legal system. It is also conceivable that a moral value or principle is embodied in both behavioral customs and codified rules, but no good match can be found at the conceptual level. In that case, it seems reasonable to assume that the value or principle at issue is embodied in the culture, but different concepts are used to express it, making it difficult to find direct translations.

A full consideration of the evidence for descriptive moral relativism along these three lines is beyond the scope of this paper. I only intend to consider enough evidence to arrive at a preliminary assessment of the cultural relativity of values in contemporary information ethics.

Privacy

It has been claimed that in Asian cultures like China and Japan, no genuine concept or value of privacy exists. These cultures have been held to value the collective over the individual. Privacy is an individual right, and such a right may not be recognized in a culture where collective interest tend to take priority over individual interests. Using the three criteria outline above, and drawing from studies of privacy in Japan, China and Thailand, I will now consider whether this conclusion is warranted.

At the conceptual level, there are words in Japanese, Chinese and Thai that refer to a private sphere, but these words seem to have substantially different meanings than the English word for privacy. Mizutani, Dorsey and Moor (2004) have argued that there is no word for "privacy" in traditional Japanese. Modern Japanese, they claim, sometimes adopt a Japanese translation for the Western word for privacy, which sounds like "puraibashii", and which is written in katakana, which is the Japanese phonetic syllabary that is mostly used for words of foreign origin. According to Nakada and Tamura (2005), Japanese does include a word for "private," "Watakusi", which means "partial, secret and selfish". It is opposed to "Ohyake", which means "public". Things that are Watakusi are considered less worthy than things that are Ohyake. Mizutani, Dorsey and Moor (2004) point out, in addition, that there are certainly behavioral customs in Japan that amount to a respect for privacy. There are conventions that restrict access to information, places or objects. For example, one is not supposed to look under clothes on public streets.

In China, the word closest to the English "privacy" is "Yinsi", which means "shameful secret" and is usually associated with negative, shameful things. Lü (2005) claims that only recently that "Yinsi" has also come to take broader meanings to include personal information, shameful or not, that people do not want others to know (see also Jingchun, 2005 and McDougall and Hansson, 2002). This shift in meaning has occurred under Western influences. As for institutional encoding of privacy principles, Lü maintains that there currently are no laws in China that protect an individual right to privacy, and the legal protection of privacy has been weak and is still limited, though there have been improvements in privacy protection since the 1980s.

Kitiyadisai (2005), finally, holds that the concept of privacy does not exist in Thailand. She claims that the Western word privacy was adopted in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century in Thailand, being transliterated as "pri-vade," but this word gained a distinctly Thai meaning, being understood as a collectivist rather than an individual notion. It referred to a private sphere in which casual dress could be worn, as opposed to a public sphere in which respectable dress had to be worn. In the Thai legal system, Kitiyadisai claims, there has not been any right to privacy since the introduction of privacy

legislation in 1997 and a Thai constitution, also in 1997, that for the first time guarantees basic human rights. Kitiyadisai argues, however, that Thai privacy laws are hardly enacted in practice, and many Thais remain unaware of the notion of privacy.

It can be tentatively concluded that the introduction of a concept of privacy similar to the Western notion has only taken place recently in Japan, China and Thailand, and that privacy legislation has only taken place recently. In traditional Japanese, Chinese and Thai culture, which still has a strong presence today, distinctions are made that resemble the Western distinction between public and private, and customs exist that may be interpreted as respective of privacy, but there is no recognized individual right to privacy.

Intellectual Property Rights

In discussing the cultural relativity of intellectual property rights (IPR), I will limit myself to one example: China. China is known for not having a developed notion of private or individual property. Under communist rule, the dominant notion of property was collective. All means of production, such as farms and factories, were to be collectively owned and operated. Moreover, the state exercised strict control over the means of production and over both the public and private sphere. A modern notion of private property was only introduced since the late 1980s. Milestones were a 1988 constitutional revision that allowed for private ownership of means of production and a 2004 constitutional amendment that protects citizens from encroachment of private property.

The notion of intellectual property has only recently been introduced in China, in the wake of China's recent economic reforms and increased economic interaction with the West. China is currently passing IPR laws and cracking down on violations of IPR in order to harmonize the Chinese economic system with the rest of the world. But as journalist Ben Worthen observes, "[t]he average citizen in China has no need and little regard for intellectual property. IPR is not something that people grew up with … and the percent of citizens who learn about it by engaging in international commerce is tiny." Worthen also points out that Chinese companies "have no incentive to respect IPR unless they are doing work for Western companies that demand it" and that "since most of the intellectual property royalties are headed out of China there isn't a lot of incentive for the government to crack down on companies that choose to ignore IPR."[iii] All in all, it can be concluded that China's value system traditionally has not included a recognition of intellectual property rights, and it is currently struggling with this concept.

Freedom of Information

Freedom of information is often held to comprise two principles: freedom of speech (the freedom to express one's opinions or ideas, in speech or in writing) and freedom of access to information. Sometimes, freedom of the press (the freedom to express oneself through publication and dissemination) is distinguished as a third principle. In Western countries, freedom of information is often defined as a constitutional and inalienable right. Law protective of freedom of information are often especially designed to ensure that individuals can exercise this freedom without governmental interference or constraint. Government censorship or interference is only permitted in extreme situations, pertaining to such things as hate speech, libel, copyright violations and information that could undermine national security.

In many nonwestern countries, freedom of information is not a guiding principle. There are few institutionalized protections of freedom of information, there are many practices that interfere with freedom of information, and a concept of freedom of information is not part of the established discourse in society. In such societies, the national interest takes precedence, and independent right to freedom information either is not recognized or is made so subordinate to national interests that it hardly resembles the Western right to freedom of information. These are countries in which practices of state censorship are widespread; mass media are largely or wholly government-controlled, the Internet, databases and libraries are censored, and messages that do not conform to the party line are cracked down upon.

Let us, as an example, consider the extent to which freedom of information can be said to be a value in Chinese society. Until the 1980s, the idea of individual rights or civil rights was not a well-known concept in China. Government was thought to exist to ensure a stable society and a prosperous economy. It was not believed to have a function to protect individual rights against collective and state interests. As a consequence of this general orientation, the idea of an individual right to freedom of information was virtually unknown. Only recently has China introduced comprehensive civil rights legislation. In its 1982

constitution, China introduced constitutional principles of freedom of speech and of the press. And in 1997, it signed the International Convention on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, and in 1998 the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (the latter of which it has not yet ratified).

Even though the Chinese government has recently come to recognize a right to freedom of information, as well as individual human rights in general, and has introduced legislation to this effect, state censorship is still rampant, and the principle of upholding state interest still tends to dominate the principle of protecting individual human rights. Internet censorship presents a good example of this. Internet traffic in China is controlled through what the Chinese call the Golden Shield, and what is known outside mainland China as the Great Firewall of China. This is a system of control in which Internet content is blocked by routers, as well as at the backbone and ISP level, through the "filtering" of undesirable URLs and keywords. A long list of such "forbidden" URLs and keywords has been composed by the Chinese State Council Information Office, in collaboration with the Communist Party's Propaganda Department. This system is especially geared towards censorship of content coming from outside mainland China (Human Rights Watch, 2006).

Rights-Centered and Virtue-Centered Morality

A recurring theme in the above three discussions has been the absence of a strong tradition of individual rights in the cultures that were discussed – those of China, Japan and Thailand – and the priority that is given to collective and state interests. Only very recently have China, Japan and Thailand introduced comprehensive human rights legislation, which has occurred mainly through Western influence, and there is still considerable tension in these societies, especially in China and Thailand, between values that prioritize the collective and the state and values that prioritize the individual.

Various authors have attempted to explain the worldview that underlies the value system of these countries. In Japan and Thailand, and to a lesser extent China, Buddhism is key to an understanding of attitudes towards individual rights. Buddhism holds a conception of the self that is antithetical to the Western conception of an autonomous self which aspires to self-realization. Buddhism holds that the self does not exist and that human desires are delusional. The highest state that humans can reach is Nirvana, a state of peace and contentment in which all suffering has ended. To reach Nirvana, humans have to become detached from their desires, and realize that the notion of an integrated and permanent self is an illusion. In Buddhism, the self is defined as fluid, situation-dependent and ever-changing. As Miziutani et al. and Kitiyadisai have noted, such a notion of the self is at odds with a Western notion of privacy and of human rights in general, notions which presuppose a situation-independent, autonomous self which pursues its own self-interests and which has inalienable rights that have to be defended against external threats.

In part through Buddhism, but also through the influence of other systems of belief such as Confucianism, Taoism and Maoism, societies like those of China and Thailand have developed a value system in which the rights or interests of the individual are subordinate to those of the collective and the state. To do good is to further the interests of the collective. Such furtherances of collective interests will generally also benefit the individual. The task of government, then, is to ensure that society as a whole functions well, in a harmonious and orderly way, and that social ills are cured, rather than the ills of single individuals. In other words, government works for the common good, and not for the individual good.

Only recently have countries like China and Thailand come to recognize individual human rights and individual interests next to collective interests. But according to Lü (2005), the collectivist ethic still prevails:

> Adapting to the demands of social diversity, the predominant ethics now express a new viewpoint that argues against the simple denial of individual interests and emphasizes instead the dialectical unification of collective interests and individual interests: in doing so, however, this ethics points out that this kind of unification must take collective interests as the foundation. That is to say, in the light of the collectivism principle of the prevailing ethics, collective interests and individual interests are both important, but comparatively speaking, the collective interests are more important than individual interests. (Lü, 2005, p. 12)

If this observation is correct, then the introduction of human rights legislation and property rights in countries like China is perhaps not motivated by a genuine recognition of inalienable individual human rights, but rather a recognition that in the current international climate, it is better to introduce human rights

and property rights, because such principles will lead to greater economic prosperity, which is ultimately to the benefit of the collective.

The dominant value systems prevalent in China, Thailand and Japan are examples of what philosopher David Wong (1984) has called virtue-centered moralities. According to Wong, at least two different approaches to morality can be found in the world: a *virtue-centered morality* that emphasizes the good of the community, and a *rights-centered morality* that stresses the value of individual freedom. Rights-centered morality is the province of the modern West, although it is also establishing footholds in other parts of the world. Virtue-centered morality can be found in traditional cultures such as can be found in southern and eastern Asia and in Africa. Wong's distinction corresponds with the frequently made distinction between individualist and collectivist culture, that is found, amongst other, in Geert Hofstede's well-known five-dimensional model of cultural difference (Hofstede, 1991). However, this latter distinction focuses on social systems and cultural practices, whereas Wong makes a distinction based in differences in moral systems.

In Wong's conception of virtue-centered moralities, individuals have duties and responsibilities that stem from the central value of a common good. The common good is conceived of in terms of an ideal conception of community life, which is based on a well-balanced social order in which every member of the community has different duties and different virtues to promote the common good. Some duties and virtues may be shared by all members. The idea that human beings have individual rights is difficult to maintain in this kind of value system, because recognition of such rights would have to find its basis in the higher ideal of the common good. But it seems clear that attributing rights to individuals is not always to the benefit of the common good. The recognition of individual property rights, for example, could result in individual property owners not sharing valuable resources that would benefit the whole community. In virtue-centered moralities, the ideal is for individuals to be virtuous, and virtuous individuals are those individuals whose individual good coincides with their contribution to the common good. Individual goods may be recognized in such communities, but they are always subordinate to the common good. Individuals deserve respect only because of their perceived contribution to the common good, not because they possess inalienable individual rights.

Conclusion

The discussion of privacy, intellectual property rights and freedom of information has shown that a good case can be made for the descriptive culture-relativity of these values. These values are central in information ethics, as it has been developed in the West. Moreover, it was argued that the uncovered cultural differences in the appraisal of these values can be placed in the context of a dichotomy between two fundamentally different kinds of value systems that exist in different societies: rights-centered and virtue-centered systems of value. Information ethics, as it has developed in the West, has a strong emphasis on rights, and little attention is paid to the kinds of moral concerns that may exist in virtue-centered systems of morality. In sum, it seems that the values that are of central concern in Western information ethics are not the values that are central in many nonwestern systems of morality. The conclusion therefore seems warranted that descriptive moral relativism is true for information ethics.

3. Metaethical Moral Relativism and Information Ethics

In section 1, it was argued that descriptive moral relativism is a necessary condition for metaethical moral relativism, but is not sufficient to prove this doctrine. However, several moral arguments exist that use the truth of descriptive relativism, together with additional premises, to argue for metaethical relativism. I will start with a consideration of two standard arguments of this form, which are found wanting, after which I will consider a more sophisticated argument.

Two Standard Arguments for Metaethical Relativism

There are two traditional arguments for metaethical moral relativism that rely on the truth of descriptive moral relativism (Wong, 1993). The one most frequently alluded to is the *argument from diversity*. This argument starts with the observation that different cultures employ widely different moral standards. Without introducing additional premises, the argument goes on to conclude that therefore, there are no

universal moral standards. This argument rests on what is known in philosophy as a naturalistic fallacy, an attempt to derive a norm from a fact, or an "ought" from an "is". The premise of the argument is descriptive: there are different moral standards. The conclusion is normative: no moral standard has universal validity. No evidence has been presented that the truth of the premise has any bearing on the truth of the conclusion.

A second, stronger, argument for moral relativism is the *argument from functional necessity*, according to which certain ethical beliefs in a society may be so central to its functioning that they cannot be given up without destroying the society. Consequently, the argument runs, these ethical beliefs are true for that society, but not necessarily in another. However, this argument is also problematic because it grounds the truth of ethical statements in their practical value for maintaining social order in a particular society. Such a standard of justification for ethical statements is clearly too narrow, as it could be used to justify the moral beliefs of societies whose beliefs and practices are clearly unethical, for instance fascist societies. If a society operates in a fundamentally unethical way, then the transformation of some of its social structures and cultural forms would seem acceptable if more ethical practices are the result.

Wong's and Harman's Argument for Metaethical Relativism

More convincing arguments for moral relativism have been presented by David Wong (1984, 2006) and Gilbert Harman (1996, 2000). Their argument runs, in broad outline, as follows. There are deep-seated differences in moral belief between different cultures. Careful consideration of the reasons for these moral beliefs they have shows that they are *elements of different strategies to realize related but different conceptions of the Good*. No good arguments can be given why one of these conceptions of the Good is significantly better than all the others. Therefore, these moral beliefs are best explained as different but (roughly) equally valid strategies for attaining the Good.

This is a much better argument than the previous two, since it puts the ball in the metaethical absolutist's court: he will have to come up with proof that it is possible to provide good arguments for the superiority of one particular conception of the Good over all other conceptions. Metaethical absolutists can respond to this challenge in two ways. First, they may choose to bite the bullet and claim that a rational comparison of different conceptions of the Good is indeed possible. Different conceptions of the Good, they may argue, rely on factual or logical presuppositions that may be shown to be false. Alternatively, they may argue that there are universally shared moral intuitions about what is good, and these intuitions can be appealed to in defending or discrediting particular conceptions of the Good. For instance an individual who believes that physical pleasure is the highest good could conceivably be persuaded to abandon this belief through exposure to arguments that purport to demonstrate that there are other goods overlooked by him that are at least as valuable. Such an argument could conceivably rely on someone's moral intuitions about the Good that could be shown to deviate from someone's explicit concept of the Good.

Second, a mixed position could be proposed, according to which it is conceded that individuals or cultures may hold different conceptions of the Good that cannot be rationally criticized (*pace* metaethical relativism) but that rational criticism of individual moral beliefs is nevertheless possible (*pace* metaethical absolutism) because these beliefs can be evaluated for their effectiveness in realizing the Good in which service they stand. After all, if moral beliefs are strategies to realize a particular conception of the Good, as Wong and Harman have argued, then they can be suboptimal in doing so. A belief that Internet censorship is justified because it contributes to a more stable and orderly society can be wrong because it may not in fact contribute to a more stable and order society. Empirical arguments may be made that Internet censorship is not necessary for the maintenance of social order, or even that Internet censorship may ultimately work to undermine social order, for example because it creates discontentment and resistance.

In the existing dialogue between proponents of rights-centered and virtue-centered systems of morality, it appears that both these approaches are already being taken. Western scholars have criticized the organicist conception of society that underlies conceptions of the Good in many Asian cultures, while Western definitions of the Good in terms of individual well-being have been criticized for their atomistic conception of individuals. Rights-based systems of morality have been criticized for undervaluing the common good, whereas virtue-based systems have been criticized for overlooking the importance of the individual good. In addition, both rights-centered and virtue-centered systems of morality have been criticized for not being successful by their own standards. Western individualism has been claimed to promote selfishness and strife, which results in many unhappy individuals plagued by avarice, proverty,

depression and loneliness. Western societies have therefore been claimed to be unsuccessful in attaining their own notion of the Good, defined in terms of individual well-being. Virtue-centered cultures have been claimed to be have difficulty in developing strong economies that serve the common good, because good economies have been argued to require private enterprise and a more individualist culture. In addition, strong state control, which is a feature of many virtue-centered cultures, has been argued to lead to corruption and totalitarianism, which also do not serve the common good.

In light of the preceding observations, it seems warranted to conclude, *pace* metaethical absolutism, that rational criticism between different moral systems is possible. It does not follow, however, that conclusive arguments for universal moral truths or the superiority of one particular moral system over others are going to be possible. Critics of a particular moral system may succeed in convincing its adherents that the system has its flaws and needs to be modified, but it could well be that no amount of criticism ever succeeds in convincing its adherents to abandon core moral beliefs within that system, however rational and open-minded these adherents are in listening to such criticism.

Conclusion

I have argued, *pace* metaethical relativism, that it is difficult if not impossible to provide compelling arguments for the superiority of different notions of the Good that are put central in different moral systems, and by implication, that it is difficult to present conclusive arguments for the universal truth of particular moral principles and beliefs. I have also argued, *pace* metaethical absolutism, that is nevertheless possible to develop rational arguments for and against particular moral values and overarching conceptions of the Good across moral systems, even if such arguments do not result in proofs of the superiority of one particular moral system or moral principle over another.

From these two metaethicals claims, a normative position can be derived concerning the way in which cross-cultural ethics ought to take place. It follows, first of all, that it is only justified for proponents of a particular moral value or principle to claim that it ought to be accepted in another culture if they make this claim on the basis of a through understanding of the moral system operative in this other culture. The proponent would have to understand how this moral system functions and what notion of the Good it services, and would have to have strong arguments that either the exogenous value would be a good addition to the moral system in helping to bring about the Good serviced in that moral system, or that the notion of the Good serviced in that culture is flawed and requires revisions. In the next section, I will consider implications of this position for the practice of information ethics in cross-cultural settings.

4. Information Ethics in a Cross-Cultural Context

It is an outcome of the preceding sections that significant differences exist between moral systems of different cultures, that these differences have important implications for moral attitudes towards uses of information and information technology, and that there are good reasons to take such differences seriously in normative studies in information ethics. In this section, I will argue, following Rafael Capurro, that we need an intercultural information ethics that studies and evaluates cultural differences in moral attitudes towards information and information technology. I will also critically evaluate the claim that the Internet will enable a new global ethic that provides a unified moral framework for all cultures.

Intercultural Information Ethics

The notion of an *intercultural information ethics* (IIE) was first introduced by Rafael Capurro (2005, forthcoming), who defined it as a field of research in which moral questions regarding information technology and the use of information are reflected on in a comparative manner on the basis of different cultural traditions. I will adopt Capurro's definition, but differ with him on what the central tasks of an IIE should be. Capurro defines the tasks of IIE very broadly. For him, they not only the comparative study of value systems in different cultures in relation to their use of information and information technology, but also studies of the effect of information technology on customs, languages and everyday problems, the changes produced by the Internet on traditional media, and the economic impact of the Internet to the extent that it can become an instrument of cultural oppression and colonialism.

I hold, in contrast, that studies of the effects of information technology in non-western cultures are more appropriately delegated to the social sciences (including communication studies, cultural studies, anthropology and science and technology studies). An intercultural information ethics should primarily focus on the comparative study of moral systems. Its overall aim would be to interpret, compare and critically evaluate moral systems in different cultures regarding their moral attitudes towards and behavior towards information and information technology.

This task for IIE can be broken down into four subtasks, the first two of which are exercises in descriptive ethics and the latter two of which belong to normative ethics. First, IIE should engage in *interpretive studies* of moral systems in particular cultures, including the systems of value contained in the religious and political ideologies that are dominant in these cultures. The primary focus in such interpretive studies within the context of IIE should be on resulting moral attitudes towards the use and implications of information technology and on the moral problems generated by uses of information technology within the context of the prevailing moral system. Second, IIE should engage in *comparative studies* of moral systems from different cultures, and arrive at analyses of both similarities and differences in the way that these moral systems are organized and operate, with a specific focus on the way in which they have different moral attitudes towards implications of information technology and on differences in moral problems generated by the use of information technology.

Third, IIE should engage in *critical studies* in which the moral systems of particular cultures are criticized based on the insights gained through the interpretive and comparative studies alluded to above, particularly in their dealings with information technology. Critical studies may be directed towards critizing moral values and beliefs in cultures other than one's own, and proposing modifications in the culture's moral system and ways in which it should solve moral problems, but may also involve self-criticism, in which one's own moral values and the moral system of one's own culture is criticized based on insights gained from the study of alternative moral systems. Fourth, IIE should engage in *interrelational studies* that focus on the construction of normative models for interaction between cultures in their dealings with information and information technology that respect their different moral systems. Interrelational studies hence investigate what moral compromises cultures can make and ought to make in their interactions and what shared moral principles can be constructed to govern their interactions.

Global Ethics and the Information Revolution

Some authors have argued that globalization and the emergence of the Internet have created a global community, and that this community requires its own moral system that transcends and unifies the moral systems of all cultures and nations that participate in this global community. The ethics needed for the construction of such a moral system has been called *global ethics*. The idea of a global ethics or ethic was first introduced by German theologian Hans Küng in 1990 and later elaborated by him in a book (Küng, 2001). His aim was to work towards a shared moral framework for humanity that would contain a minimal consensus concerning binding values and moral principles that could be invoked by members of a global community in order to overcome differences and avoid conflict.

Krystyna Górniak-Kocikowska (1996) has argued that the computer revolution that has taken place has made it clear that a future global ethic will have to be a computer ethic or information ethic. As she explains, actions in cyberspace are not local, and therefore the ethical rules governing such actions cannot be rooted in a particular local culture. Therefore, unifying ethical rules have to be constructed in cyberspace that can serve as a new global ethic. Similar arguments have been presented by Bao and Xiang (2006) and De George (2006).

No one would deny that a global ethic, as proposed by Küng, would be desirable. The construction of an explicit shared moral framework that would bind all nations and cultures would evidently be immensely valuable. It should be obvious, however, that such a framework could only develop as an addition to existing local moral systems, not as a replacement of them. It would be a framework designed to help solve global problems, and would exist next to the local moral systems that people use to solve their local problems. In addition, it remains to be seen if cross-cultural interactions over the Internet yield more than a mere set of rules for conduct online, a global netiquette, and will result in a global ethic that can serve as a common moral framework for intercultural dialogue and joint action. Hongladarom (2001) has concluded, based on empirical studies, that the Internet does not create a worldwide monolithic culture but rather reduplicates existing cultural boundaries. It does create an umbrella cosmopolitan culture to some extent, but only for those Internet users that engage in cross-cultural

dialogue, which is a minority, and this umbrella culture is rather superficial. Claims that the Internet will enable a new global ethic may therefore be somewhat premature. In any case, such intercultural dialogue online will have to be supplemented with serious academic work in intercultural information ethics, as well as intercultural ethics at large.

5. Conclusion

It was found in this essay that very different moral attitudes exist in Western and nonwestern countries regarding three key issues in information ethics: privacy, intellectual property, and freedom of information. In nonwestern countries like China, Japan and Thailand, there is no strong recognition of individual rights in relation to these three issues. These differences were analyzed in the context of a difference, proposed by philosopher David Wong, between rights-centered moralities that dominate in the West and virtue-centered moralities that prevail in traditional cultures, including those in South and East Asia. It was then argued that cross-cultural normative ethics cannot be practiced without a thorough understanding of the prevailing moral system in the culture that is being addressed. When such an understanding has been attained, scholars can proceed to engage in moral criticism of practices in the culture and propose standards and solutions to moral problems. It was argued, following Rafael Capurro, that we need an intercultural information ethics that engages in interpretive, comparative and normative studies of moral problems and issues in information ethics in different cultures. It is to be hoped that researchers in both Western and nonwestern countries will take up this challenge and engage in collaborative studies and dialogue on an issue that may be of key importance to future international relations.

References

Bao, X. and Xiang, Y. (2006). Digitalization and Global Ethics. *Ethics and Information Technology* 8: 41–47.

Capurro, R. (2005). Privacy: An Intercultural Perspective. *Ethics and Information Technology 7* (1), 37-47.

Capurro, R. (forthcoming). Intercultural Information Ethics. In R. Capurro, J. Frühbaure and T. Hausmanningers (eds.), *Localizing the Internet. Ethical Issues in Intercultural Perspective*. Munich: Fink Verlag. Also online at http://www.capurro.de/iie.html.

De George, R. (2006). Information Technology, Globalization and Ethics. *Ethics and Information Technology* 8: 29–40.

Ess, C. (2002). Computer-Mediated Colonization, the Renaissance, and Educational Imperatives for an Intercultural Global Village. *Ethics and Information Technology* 4(1), 11–22.

Gorniak-Kocikowska, K. (1996). The Computer Revolution and the Problem of Global Ethics. *Science and Engineering Ethics* 2: 177–190.

Harman, G. (1996). Moral Relativism. In G. Harman and J.J. Thompson (eds.), *Moral Relativism and Moral Objectivity*. Cambridge MA: Blackwell Publishers, pp. 3-64.

Harman, G. (2000). Is There a Single True Morality? In G. Harman, *Explaining Value: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, pp. 77-99. (Orig. 1984)

Hofstede, G. (2001) *Culture's Consequences*. Sage.

Hongladarom, S. (2001). Global Culture, Local Cultures and the Internet: The Thai Example. In C. Ess (ed.), *Culture, Technology, Communication: Towards an Intercultural Global Village*. State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, pp. 307–324.

Human Rights Watch (2006). *Race to the Bottom. Corporate Complicity in Chinese Internet Censorship*. Human Rights Watch report vol. 18, no. 8(C). Online at http://www.hrw.org.

Johnson, D. (2000). *Computer Ethics*, 3rd ed, Upper Sadle River: Prentice Hall.

Jingchun, C. (2005). Protecting the Right to Privacy in China. *Victoria University of Wellington Law Review* 38 (3). Online at http://www.austlii.edu.au/nz/journals/VUWLRev/2005/25.html.

Kitiyadisai , K. (2005). Privacy Rights and Protection: Foreign Values in Modern Thai Context. *Ethics and Information Technology* 7: 17–26.

Küng, H. (2001). *A Global Ethic for Global Politics and Economics*. Hong Kong: Logos and Pneuma Press.

Lü, Yao-Huai (2005). Privacy and Data Privacy Issues in Contemporary China. *Ethics and Information Technology* 7: 7–15.

McDougall, B. and Hansson, A. (eds.) (2002). *Chinese Concepts of Privacy*. Brill Academic Publishers.

Mizutani, M., Dorsey, J., and Moor, J. (2004). "The Internet and Japanese Conception of Privacy." *Ethics and Information Technology* 6:2, 121-128.

Nakada, M. and Tamura, T. (2005). Japanese Conceptions of Privacy: An Intercultural Perspective. *Ethics and Information Technology* 7: 27–36.

Wong, D. (1984). *Moral Relativity*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Wong, D. (1993). Relativism. In P. Singer (ed.), *A Companion to Ethics*. Blackwell, pp. 442-450.

Wong, D. (2006). *Natural Moralities: A Defense of Pluralistic Relativism.* Oxford University Press.

---

[i] By information ethics I mean the study of ethical issues in the use of information and information technology. Contemporary information ethics is a result of the digital revolution (or information revolution) and focuses mainly on ethical issues in the production, use and dissemination of digital information and information technologies. It encloses the field of computer ethics (Johnson, 2000) as well as concerns that belong to classical information ethics (which was a branch of library and information science), media ethics and journalism ethics.

[ii] This doctrine is called metaethical rather than normative because it does not make any normative claims, but rather makes claims about the nature of moral judgments. *Normative moral relativism* would be the thesis that it is morally wrong to judge or interfere with the moral practices of societies, groups, cultures or individuals who have moral values different from one's own. This is a normative thesis because it makes prescriptions for behavior.

[iii] Worthen, B. (2006). Intellectual Property: China's Three Realities. *CIO Blogs.* Online at http://blogs.cio.com/intellectual_property_chinas_three_realities. Accessed October 2006.