

Reflection on Ethical Cyberspace: An Ethics of Human Development and Capabilities Approach

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ABSTRACT

The internet is a technology that permeates in the habitat of the modern man of today. It carries the power to change and mold the way man lives and acts. It can produce many other effects as well out of it that may not have been thought of before. To consider that man as a being in relation to others carries the distinction of values shared and dissipated to everyone. And the internet is a medium where communication and interaction of one being to another do happen. Such a development need not produce a worsening of man's wellbeing and flourishing. In fact, the internet, if put to an ethical use and regulated by reflexive minds, can produce a powerful tool for progress and development, not only on economic terms, but on human development as well. As we strive to preserve humanity that we would want it to normatively become, we actively pursue an ethical development of cyberspace and its derivatives thereof.

Key words: ethics, ethical cyberspace, reflection on technology, ethical use of technology

INTRODUCTION

Why do we find ourselves at this point of time asking about ethics of cyberspace? The present day modern man in today's society cannot escape the advent of science and technology alongside the good and the harm it can give. Man is caught in the time to adjust with the fast paced developments in technology and the sciences, particularly the cyberspace, or internet. There are those who are fast learners and there are those who can just barely keep up. But sometimes what is mostly left behind is the ghost that hunts us today about the bad and harmful side of the use of the internet. What is wrong with the internet? Is it evil? Is it bad? Is pornography bad? Is cyber bullying bad? Is identity theft wrong? The use of technology by man causes us to question the ethics cyberspace. Why do we think we sense in our being a call for further clarity and enlightenment on this matter on

hand? Are we fearful that the wrong and bad in the Internet would make humanity worse if unabated and no ethics to constrain it? Is the present use of the internet already is a sort of bandage that our inner self seems to be shouting that we all slowdown and think about the wrong that is and can be happening.

Here are some reasons why we need to study and reflect on achieving an ethical cyberspace:

a. Our sense of existence is affected

“The body is affected by another affect which excludes the thing’s existence (by IIP17)”

On Human Freedom p.165

“Man’s lack of power to moderate and restrain the affects I call bondage”.

“For the man who is subject to affects is under the control, not of himself, but of fortune, in whose power lie so greatly is that often, though he sees the better for himself, he is still forced to follow the worse”. (de Spinoza, 1996)

Ethics, Bondage, Control and Affects, p. 113

b. We desire to seek the good

“to arrive at an agreement that will issue an effective practical decision-making”

“That kind of conversation occurs when a group of individuals inquire together about how it would be best for them to act, so that some good can be achieved or some evil avoided, where that good is both an individual and a common good.”

Alasdair MacIntyre

Ethics and Politics Vol. 2 p.205

c. Divine law compels us to act on a moral duty

Elizabeth Anscombe argued that *'modern, Aristotelian concepts of moral obligation, moral duty, of what is morally right and wrong, and of the moral sense of ought are survivals outside the framework of thought that made them really intelligible, namely the belief in divine law'*.

John L. Mackie
Ethics, Inventing Right and Wrong, p. 45

We stop and pause and wear our hats of reflexivity to tackle this issue.

DISCUSSION

A. Choices, Actions and Moral Consequences

1. As man pursues progress and development, the sense of self and being are negotiated in time. Man arranges for himself a social order of which he preserves what he values and discards the things that can harm him. How does man decide on what he will consider as right and wrong is a philosophical question that ethical theorist have been thinking for so long.
2. John L. Mackie, in his book *Reinventing Right and Wrong*, points to the moral agents' choices, actions and its moral consequences. He further asks the question, *'who is ultimately responsible?'*
3. In the use of the internet people are free to express what they want by choosing the things they want to do, to play, to see, to gaze, to indulge in, to be passionate about, to lust in, to stalk, etc. All in the pursuit of what suits a person in his life expressions and what would bring about happiness.

4. But an individual is not alone in his pursuit of this, so does millions of people as well who would, will do and can do the things he as well thing is good to do.
5. **Conflicting Liberties:** These liberties are bound to conflict with one another; hence the institutional rules specifying them must be adjusted so that each liberty fits into a coherent scheme of liberties. The priority of liberty means that a basic liberty can be limited or denied only for the sake of one or more other basic liberties, and never for a greater public good understood as a greater net sum of social or economic advantages for society as a whole (Mackie, 1997).
6. **Adjusting Liberties:** The internet is an interaction of people of different desires, wants, preferences etc, all in the name of their freedom of information and rights and liberties. But as John Rawls has put it, that liberty must be secured and basic liberties are to be adjusted so that all will benefit (Rawls, 2003). It also necessitates restriction and regulation. Rules of order are required.
7. If we are to reflect on what would make the internet ethical in its usage, we must know what else are there that one needs to secure not only for oneself, but also for others. Whose good are we after? Are we after only individual vested and selfish interests? Or are we looking at a collective good? Is the collective human race altruistic enough to arrive at a common good for all to observe and be controlled about? Or are we after a 'democratic' free for all consumerist type of usage of the internet where ethics is just an afterthought? Will we only arrive at a concern for the others when we ourselves are put in a disadvantage and harm's way? Are we not blameworthy ourselves for the proliferation of the wrong that the internet is prevalent at the moment because of our choices, preferences and self interests?
8. How do we find our way from just being humans, to becoming the humans we ought to be?

B. Our Sense of Being and the Other

The appeal for an ethical cyberspace is a call for humanity to become the humans we can develop to be. Emmanuel Levinas conceptualized the moral ought by stating that 'ethics always occur in relation to other persons (Beavers, 1990). Ethics is an important issue for us because it governs the way in which we relate with one another (the internet included). We are obligated to respond to the transcendent other who holds the self hostage. Wherein the meaning of my own being a self is found in opposition to the other, as an essential ability to respond to the other. It is as though the 'I' is made to stand in the place of the other. This 'substitution' shows how other-directed the human being actually is. And in so doing my identity becomes concrete (Levinas, 2006).

- As reflective people in the academe, are we prepared to bear the burdens of others?

- What are the wrongs and the harms that come in the usage of the internet?

- Are we ethically responsible to those who are harmed in the use of the internet?

C. Bioethical Principles as a Guide to Ethics in the Internet

If man is to develop himself to not just be a human being, but to develop himself to the Human he can develop to become, what would it entail?

I suggest these principles developed by James Childress and Tom Beauchamp for our philosophical thought exercise to reflect upon.

If we are to secure what we value, what would these be? And for us to consider that humanity's usage of the internet as ethical, what concept can we use to frame this thought? May I suggest the following:

1. **Respect for Persons** - also known as Respect for Autonomy.

The respect for autonomous choices of persons runs as deep in common morality as any principle. It does not need to be excessively individualistic since one should not neglect the social nature of individuals and the impact of individual choices and actions on others. This should not also excessively focus on reason, for emotions are valuable as well. And it should not be very legalistic that legal rights are so highlighted that social practices are downplayed.

To respect an agent as autonomous is to acknowledge that person's rights to hold views, to make choices, and to take actions based on personal values and beliefs.

This would mean that to have an ethical usage of the internet, ethicality starts with us as we interact with the others (Buauchamp and Childress, 2001). As we 'surf' our way in the vast super information highway and interact with others, we observe this principle of respect for autonomy.

2. **Nonmaleficence**- this principle asserts an obligation not to inflict harm on others. In medical ethics, this is associated to the maxim *Primum non nocere*: "Above all [or first] do no harm." If internet users will invoke this principle of reflecting that whatever they are doing, they are guided and guarded with the thought of doing no harm, then we can say that ethics in relation to the others is relatively observed. The concept of nonmaleficence is explained by the use of the word *harm* and *injury*. The term is used normatively and nonnormatively. "Internet user X harmed internet user Y" sometimes means that X wronged or treated Y unjustly. But it can also mean that internet user X caused an adverse effect on

YS interest. In using these notions, *wronging* involves violating someone's rights. Rights are important values to be secured among human beings, internet users or non-users alike. Some arguments about this principle can be about the agent's intentions where in the result of a person's actions is intentional in creating such harmful effect or harm is just a foreseen effect and may not necessarily result to a real one. Ethics, since it is considered more of an individual action, seems to be limited in this principle we are trying to apply it with.

3. **Beneficence** - If we are to reflect how morality and ethics is to guide us in developing ourselves to the human that we can become, morality requires us to not only treat persons autonomously and do no harm to them, but also that we contribute to their welfare as well. Compared to nonmaleficence, this principle demands the agent to take positive steps to help others. With this principle, it is near to the ethics and philosophy of the others of Levinas. This requires agents to provide benefits, in turn producing the best overall result. A community of internet users collectively united in one campaign or advocacy could bring about the good the cyberspace can harvest and continue about. Examples of these are stories we hear where Facebook users form in solidarity to help a lost child, an old person with Alzheimer's found straying around, or joining forces to rally for a worthy cause like exposing politicians who are abusive of their power and influence.

- **Other examples from this rite are:**

- a. Protect and defend the rights of others
 - b. Prevent harm from occurring to others
 - c. Remove conditions that will cause harm to others
 - d. Help persons who have limitations
 - e. Rescue people who are in danger
4. **Justice** - There will always be inequalities in the use of the internet. One example is the use of stronger signal and wide bandwidth broadband sticks. With economism where people who have more

purchasing power, buy the speed that they need, versus those who can only afford out of the pocket price for speed. Others would say that it is not fair. Should internet use be a fair and equal use and rights for all? Should everyone be given equal access to the internet and to sites that are asking for payments be made open and free? What is a fair use of the internet line? And along with this is what is fair when it comes to free downloads of eBooks, movies, and other stuffs online? What is just and fair? Theories of justice are very wide and deep. And discussing these will take a semester or more to finish. We will just focus on the area of reflective equilibrium by Norman Daniels derivative of the theory of justice of John Rawls.

- It has been suggested that the real work of practical ethics lies in "specifying norms". This necessitates the acknowledgement of a careful diagnosis of a situation and sensitivity to a context (Daniels, 1996). One cannot just react and claim there is unfairness or injustice when a deeper picture of the person, the setting and other values and variables are not accounted for nor factored in. In the present pursuit of man for a better life and flourishing, comes along the deepening and wider view of history, culture and understanding of humanity. Without these things, humanity can disintegrate to self interest drive beings that pursue only their own vested fleeting interests. To secure for humanity a better future, for ourselves today, and our, posterity in the future, the need to be knowledgeable and observant of what the present day humans must continue to preserve must be protected and passed on.
- How do we operationalize a reflective equilibrium in pursuing an ethical cyberspace? Due to the limitation of time, we will not discuss this any further but will just allow the attendees to reflect on these matters or enroll in a class to find more about this.

D. The Ethics of Development and Capabilities Approach

What is ethics of development?

As science and technology permeates the life and functioning of the present modern man, one can ask, what is these development for? To whom? For what? And how can we consider it a development?

Compared to what has been known in our experience as a country, our history itself is filled with advancements in the guise of progress and developments. Example of this is the building of dams that floods the ancestral domain of our cultural minorities and ethnic groups. Another one is the lending of international loans to government administrations that are known to be corrupt to build infrastructures that are either useless or will not contribute to an optimized and overall good effect for the country (Gasper, 2004). Example of this is the loan that the Marcos administration had in building the Bataan Nuclear Power Plant in an earthquake fault zone.

Now, allow me to point some ethical concerns and issues of internet usage and the dilemma it poses.

1. Disparity among the people in the use of the internet

- a. As much as we can say that there is the rising class of internet savvy citizenry, we still can see that many Filipinos don't have internet connections or a computer in their own homes.
- b. That much freedom and rights are experienced, talked about, and fought for in the internet and interactions on chat rooms and exchanges in posting of comments about various issues, many people are still brushed aside of their sorry situations and their voices are not being heard.

- c. As participants in forums and discussions on different issues and topics are prevalent in the internet, yet in reality, these still lack the push and power to affect and effectuate the change that they can and should carry about. An example of this is the popularity and support that Carlos Celdran receives when he stood against the oppressive stance of the Catholic Church about the RH Bill. Yet choosing between the two, cyber empathizers of Carlos, were not visible afterwards when he was thrown in jail.
 - d. Virtual reality pose an opium sort of caffeinated empowerment that causes an addiction to the people but can fail in the grounds of reality when it is called upon to act on the real world. Some would just want to lie on the shadows of anonymity and in cowardice attack others because of their own insecurities and dysfunctionalities.
 - e. The virtual world of the internet can be a ground where the worst of humanity can thrive, preying on the weakness of others just the same as in the real world where marshalling the streets for crimes and injustice is not adequate enough to stop any harm.
2. For one to consider the internet to be ethical and therefore good, we subject it to Martha Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach (Nussbaum, 2000) to evaluate if the internet usage of reflective humans can be considered ethical. From here also, we can derive the technology of the internet as worthy of it being part of human development and flourishing. The following are my own adjustments of Nussbaum's Approach in applying to achieve an ethical cyberspace.
- a. With the use of internet as technology, man and his interaction with others would preserve life and wellbeing.
 - b. The health of people will not be put at risk. Example of this is the wrong health information posted and created by (sometimes unintended) non-health specialists acting on information they

have gleamed on the internet. Sometimes the postings are hoax and erroneous info spread by bad people.

- c. Bodily integrity will be preserved and maintained. (No human trafficking, selling of human organs, cybersex, or pedophilia, or any form of sexual and emotional harm.
- d. On senses, imagination and thought: Being able to use the senses, imagination, thoughts, and reasons in ways that are adequately educated, informed, and free from repression.
- e. Emotions: The capability to have attachments and feelings for other people and things. Have you ever found yourself crying on a post of your friend when you see the video or read the story of how a story of someone was able to rise above the problems of life? Example of this is the man with no limbs.
- f. Practical reason as a capability: Being able to form the conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about planning one's life. The internet can be a good tool for life plans and directions. Like seeing how it is that other people are able to make a good wedding proposal. Or how travelling in the country can make one feel proud of one's heritage and love for country?
- g. Affiliation: Being able to interact well with other people and to imagine and empathize with their situation. Having self-respect and giving it to others as well. Non-discrimination on grounds of race and sex. Sample of this is when you talk with friends from long ago and far away and connect again with them with chat, or Skype or video call. These are good things that can contribute to the betterment of humanity.
- h. Capability to care for other species. Example of this is cruelty against animals and seeing videos about other animals and living things that we have not known deeply before. It creates

a sense of deeper humanity in us and our relation with other sentient beings and living things.

- i. Capability to play in a safe environment, free from harm (emotional and physical)

- j. Control over one's environment: have you noticed how Facebook has adjusted itself in providing continually evolving privacy settings for its users? This is an observance of a sense of properness in the use of this technology and development.

CONCLUSION

The internet is a technology that permeates in the habitat of the modern man of today. It carries the power to change and mold the way man lives and acts. It can produce many other effects as well out of it that may not have been thought of before. To consider that man as a being in relation to others carries the distinction of values shared and dissipated to everyone. And the internet is a medium where communication and interaction of one being to another do happen. Such a development need not produce a worsening of man's wellbeing and flourishing. In fact, the internet, if put to an ethical use and regulated by reflexive minds can produce a powerful tool for progress and development, not only on economic terms, but on human development as well. As we strive to preserve humanity that we would want it to normatively become, we actively pursue an ethical development of cyberspace and its derivatives thereof. The cyberspace, with the advent of smart phones, can now literally be told, is on the palm of our hands. What we do with it, how we use it, will forge the way if this technological development will pave the way to a better us, a better human being towards the other and a greater nation built on an ethics of development.

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