

# Defining Cyberethics

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**Abstract** — Focus of this paper is on ethical issues related to the era of Internet, e.g. cyberethics. Approach used in this paper is phenomenology, whereas definitions of cyberethics are discussed from the viewpoint of pragmatic ethics, while questioning existing basic values in society and proportion these into pragmatic, de facto ideology. Resulting comparison provides conceptual analysis on cyberethics as well as provides new perspectives on research on cyberethics. This paper demonstrates, that there exists a conflict between pragmatic and general moral law, which is foundational one.

**Keywords** — Cyberethics, Virtuality, eSociety, Self regulation, De facto ethics.

## I. INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on ethical issues closely related to the era of Internet, e.g. cyberethics. In this paper the authors a) provide a definition of cyberethics from the viewpoint of pragmatic ethics, and b) discuss certain basic values (democracy, freedom of speech, equity) and proportion these into pragmatic, de facto ideology. Resulting comparison will provide following contributions; a) conceptual analysis on cyberethics and b) new perspectives on cyberethics research.

Methodologically this study is phenomenological one. According to Gilles Deleuze, philosophy is needed especially in situations, where new phenomena already exist, and both concepts and words are swarming in space. It is philosophy's duty to clarify situation [1]. This study accepts the challenge proposed by Deleuze (as well as Félix Guattari) – after all, virtual reality is one metaphor for dimension like space. Phenomenological bracketing was chosen as a research method particularly because of “being behindhand” [2]. In phenomenology central concepts or phenomena are taken into consideration from different perspectives. It is quite obvious that for example concept “digital divide” has a number of meanings depending on chosen discipline, or viewpoint. In phenomenological reduction attempt to define significance and discipline becomes a systematic attempt on controlling chaos [3].

Defining the cyberethics is a cross-disciplinary project. Topic is related to such concepts as internet ethics, self regulation, game theory, plagiarism, trust and privacy, digital divide, professional ethics, surveillance and regulations related to freedom of speech, to name a few. These are very common topics in publications concentrated on internet ethics [4]-[8].

According to pragmatism, values are being tested all the time with reality [9]. This is to say that pragmatism does not accept any permanent values, and therefore it is suitable for describing virtual ethics and reality. Usually development in value hierarchies is slow, but sometimes it

is surprisingly fast [10]. Pragmatism is also based on scientific optimism [11], where it can be said that pragmatic ethics reflects advances in IT.

There is a common principle that applies on both Internet and information technology in general. As soon as a new technology is being introduced, everyone is eager to utilize it as soon as possible. There are no significant attempts in creating standards to follow, but instead solutions created by one vendor will quite soon become “de facto standards”. Application is being accepted by general public without being defined and accepted officially, because this would take too much time.

Similar de facto –practice appears to exist in moral issues related to Internet. Moral codes are being molded and introduced taking only pragmatic issues into account. Actors are everything but professionals. A new moral is being created in Internet all the time; new virtual communities are being born all the time, and these form rules and practices, which depart greatly from commonly accepted ethical codes in society. From ethical viewpoint this phenomenon is interesting – it appears that everything is happening faster in Internet [12]. Pragmatism is suitable way for describing the development of Internet, all de facto practices, which are being measured based on their suitability alone. Likewise, the concept of self regulation is more than applicable with pragmatic ethics.

Self regulation creates ethical codes while at the same time influences existing regulations, norms taking shape. This type of action is very Hobbesian by nature. There exists pragmatic de facto ideology behind self regulation. A justified question stated is: what basic values self regulation takes into account and which it chooses to ignore? One could argue that binding moral values into consequences of actions is basically simplifying ethics. Ethics, which studies consequences (pragmatism, de facto), aims to be able to estimate and evaluate consequences of actions. Thus everything is measured in money (or by effectiveness).

When considering possible consequences of action and compatibility with existing moral law, for example violence provided by Internet does not gain amnesty – even in cases where a proof about caused damages can not be given [13]. In this study authors analyze chosen basic values (democracy, freedom of speech, equity) and proportion these to pragmatic de facto ideology. As a result, this study provides a comparison which illuminates a) basic concepts in detail, and b) opens new perspectives for research in cyberethics. Authors will demonstrate that there exists a conflict between pragmatic and general moral law, which is foundational one. Explanatory power of pragmatism is greater though.

## II. METHOD

Phenomenology can be called eidetics, which means that it is possible with the assistance of the eidetic reduction to reach the essence of the things and phenomena [14]. In his earlier studies Edmund Husserl (*The Idea of Phenomenology*) [15] claims that the universal is seen in the individual. The move from the individual intuition to the grasp of the universal is a move to grasp the essence. Husserl calls this “method” eidetic intuition. Husserl believed that it was possible to have an insight into the essential nature of things. He argued that these essences could be seen in a manner analogous to perceptual seeing of a physical object [16]. This eidetic seeing is what Husserl calls seeing essence or essential seeing.

The traditional phenomenological method turns problematic when cyberethics is defined. In our opinion cyberethics is not a concept or an idea but an ongoing dynamic process that is almost impossible to grasp by means of a model, for instance. Things that are changing irregularly all the time can be handled in the same way as Zeno tried to deny the motion. In his aporia or paradox about the arrow that never gets to the target Zeno claimed that at any point in time a moving object must be at rest [17]. That’s how the models are constructed, they require an infinite amount of “rest positions”, whereas we suppose that cyberethics is an entity that is changing all the time. How is it possible then to define such a phenomenon? We need to take an ontological standpoint. We don’t ask what cyberethics is but how it is. The crucial question is how cyberethics exists?

When defining cyberethics we are not trying to gain the essence of the concept but the meaning of it. As E. D. Hirsch states, an interpretive hypothesis is ultimately a probability judgement that is supported by evidence [18]. When defining cyberethics, the researchers are actually interpreting the society and the cultural strata of it. We are in the middle of the life flow all the time, which means that we are only able to understand the factual reality, in other words we are commuting between two existential categories, the actual projects and the factual reality. [19] - [20]. When an individual is interpreting his own life, he is actually moving in the same way as the life itself. Husserl calls the life-world the ultimate horizon of all human achievement. As conscious beings the individuals always inhabit the life-world. It is pre-given in advance and experienced as a unity. It is the general structure that allows objectivity.

We are in the life-world and at the same time we are interpreting a particular area of it, i.e. the virtual reality and the values – the cyberethics. The results of our research depend on the standpoints that we have taken – in practice it is impossible to occupy all the possible viewpoints. That’s why we have to be content with the probability in our research – we aspire to give an account of the cyberethics as it is seen in this phase of our culture and civilization. The result of the phenomenological project is always the insight of the phenomenon and the description of this insight.

## III. THE ETERNAL RETURN IN CYBERETHICS – FREEDOM OF SPEECH

The history of mankind is filled with myths of eternal return (Spengler, Nietzsche, Antics, Christianity etc.). But it is not only in mythology and fairy tales that this theme is constantly repeated. It is possible to find the same model in science, too. In his book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) Thomas Kuhn presents the idea that science does not progress via a linear accumulation of new knowledge, but instead undergoes periodic revolutions which he calls “paradigm shifts”, in which the nature of scientific inquiry within a particular field is abruptly transformed [21]. The paradigmatic shifts are preceded by periods of stagnation. The progress of science, as Kuhn describes it, can be seen in a circular way, the scientific revolution always returns, it had to take place.

The same phenomenon can be seen in the products of all creative activities. The creative periods are always followed by stagnation and institutionalization. The corresponding development is to be discerned in all social, cultural and technical phenomena – and in the arts [22]. Many of the cultural structures and phenomena can be seen and described with the help of the eternal return (repetition) [23].

The same concerns the Internet. Upon the introduction of Internet, many pioneers of the information age had high hopes for it. Maybe the Internet didn’t fulfil those expectations. People were talking about increased democracy and freedom, better possibilities in all social participation and communication and so forth, basically about the democratic values. Jürgen Habermas says in his theory of discourse ethics that there is a communicative void in the society. The more people and institutions communicate in a society, the more efficiently democracy is working. [24] The Internet should fill this communicative void. This also means that the Internet could be socially valuable, positive value. But the Internet is constantly changing; it is a dynamic communication environment. According to Habermas the bourgeoisie, when it had taken the power, began immediately to work up the public sphere, where communication takes place, in the favour of its own interests. There prevails only one truth in that kind of society. The Internet, on the contrary, represents pluralism, competition between different opinions and genuine free public debate [25]. Economical interest, commercialism and the commercial media threaten free communication. According to Habermas these do not belong to the area of free communication, nor do the administrative organisations. In the early days of the Internet there was no commercialism and as little administration as possible. Lee Salter, a Habermas researcher, says that the Internet grows apart all the time from those ideals of free communication which were so typical of it in the beginning. The government uses the Internet more and more for administrative and propagandistic aims, and they are trying to use the Internet as a means to control citizens. The ideal of Internet communication was interactivity in the beginning, whereas

communication has recently become more and more one-sided or non-communicative. [26] Deborah G. Johnson claims that commercial interests have all the time increasing their influence on the development of the Internet. This is based on the fact that free market forces have realized that the Internet is an important and efficient tool and media [27] and have taken over it.

Democracy was one of the great ideals in the pioneering times of the Internet. (Yoneji Masuda and the computopia, 1972) [28]. Like other positive values it was like an impetus or a driving force that put the Internet's development in motion. But as it is with all the ideals and beautiful values, they do not flourish in reality. Many on the NSMs (New social movements) make use of the Internet when communicating. Internet is cheap, fast, interactive and offers possibilities to anonymity. But these movements that operate underground or outside the control of the society are often organisationally antidemocratic. [29] So it is possible to see the model of the eternal return here, too. It means the fall of free, progressive forces and the victory of institutionalization and stagnation.

The faster the Internet and ICT are growing and developing, the better has become the methods of controlling the citizens. Panopticon, Michel Foucault's all-embracing metaphor telling about and describing the official horror and terror, has finally been realized [30]. At the same time when the Internet makes the communication between individuals run smoothly, it gives the public administration and terrorists (hackers etc.) a comparable and as efficient a tool to supervise and sort people, to invade citizens' privacy. With the assistance of figure and face recognition it is possible to pick up persons from an anonymous mass and build up their virtual identities that has little to do with the real personae. Is the effective way of controlling people valuable in one way or the other? Of course, if we think of the public administration, bureaucracy and all the overseeing authorities (the police, the customs, security services or tax authorities), the efficient monitoring is a useful phenomenon. [31] The question is about the balance between privacy and thrust. The more the public takes over the area of personal privacy, the more the citizens feel anxious and defend against the intrusion [32]. But at the same time the area of free communication is threatened. Here the freedom and effectiveness are fighting against each other. When defining the valuable, we must decide which viewpoint we choose – this is one of the main questions in phenomenology. Are we obliged to take a stand? Are we going to evaluate the effectiveness from the point of view of the authorities, or are we going to take a stand on citizens' favor? It is here, where the question about different ethical theories comes along.

#### IV. PRAGMATISM AND DE FACTO ETHICS

Is pragmatism the best possible ethical theory suitable for cyberethics? Pragmatism explains technical development and progress in moral well but when justice is taken into account, pragmatism is not the best possible

explanatory model. Pragmatism emphasizes the importance of activity in human life. Pihlström says that although the scientific worldview would not be the best possible (to the mankind), we can make the world a better place to live in through our active work [33]. In addition to optimism William James's and John Dewey's pragmatism emphasized development and change, that is why it suits well the world of information technology. According to pragmatism, values are being tested all the time with reality [34]. This is to say that pragmatism does not accept any permanent values, and therefore it is suitable for describing virtual ethics and reality. The norms exist in relation to the surroundings, they are context bound. The individual reactions against the value hierarchy can change it. Usually development in value hierarchies is slow, but sometimes it is surprisingly fast.

The moral action is not only the adaptation of moral rules, because the moral principles are suppositions or hypothesis, which have to be tested constantly. They must fulfill certain qualifications or requirements and they are open for changes. When we test moral rules we also interpret them. Legal system and legislation are good examples: The judges not only adapt the law but they also interpret it because they so often had to do with precedents without applications.

According to pragmatism things don't have any values, they are value neutral. After all, pragmatism accepts value hierarchy. But this hierarchy is not a permanent one. Why don't we think likewise about the Internet? It is possible to measure the usefulness of the Internet and we can call the result of the measurement the utility of the Internet. Now we are very near consequentialism, which, as its name suggests, is the view where normative properties depend only on consequences. This general approach can be applied on different levels to different normative properties of different kinds of things, but the most prominent example is consequentialism about the moral rightness of acts, which claims that whether an act is morally right depends only on the consequences of that act or of something related to that act, such as the motive behind the act or a general rule requiring acts of the same kind.

The pragmatic moral bound to consequences is an easy way to describe the Internet and the fast technological advance. Many of the traditional pragmatists agree on the idea that everything, also the moral arguments, can be measured. The argument "Violence is unethical" can be tested as well as any other proposition.

Immanuel Kant argued that moral requirements are based on a standard of rationality. Kant called this rule the Categorical Imperative. It is one of the main clauses of the deontological normative ethical theory. According to Kant we are acting in a certain way because we have different kinds of duties towards ourselves and others. This may appear strange to the adherent of pragmatism.

Edmund Husserl held an interesting lecture on ethics in Vienna in 1935. [35] The highest ethical goal of the rational culture and civilization is its spontaneous and self-steered improvement. In the same way as a rational

individual is able to evaluate and study his practical goals, so can a whole culture. European (or western) culture is therefore able to direct its future itself. According to Husserl there are ideal absolute goals, as well as ethical, that can never be gained or fulfilled totally, but they are something worth aiming at. Here Husserl comes near Immanuel Kant's regulative principle. These aims and the relationship of the European civilization to these goals can be evaluated over and over again, and this is the strength of the rational European civilization. Edmund Husserl doesn't name precisely what these goals may be, but it is highly probable that the idea of equality could be among these definitive aims. [36] As T. Miettinen states, equality in a society can't be described quantitatively or geometrically. Nevertheless, we understand what it means. We are able to evaluate our activity in proportion to this goal even though we can never achieve it. Although it is out of our reach, it determines our activities and choice. [37] This means that we are trying to achieve equality, for instance, over and over again. This project originates (socially) from French Revolution in 1789 and is still going on. The original Internet enterprise (ARPANET) in the 1970s was based on this kind of noble ideals (democracy, equality, non-commercialism, free speech and communication), but as Deborah Johnson stated, these pioneering dreams have been crushed. Control has taken over and because of commercialism there is no democracy, equality or area for free communication, to put it simply [38]. However, these goals or absolute ideals do still exist and are waiting for the new evaluation, as Husserl said. Husserl speaks about reappraisal and new beginning, but on a very universal level.

Pragmatism is based on so called de facto ethics, and it easily neglects values like democracy and equality. Profit, surplus, effective use of time, logistics, effectiveness, price and usefulness are some of the "values" typical of the de facto pragmatism. But it is not so simple. If pragmatists get an assignment that consists of the development of Internet democracy, they certainly accomplish it, without thinking of the meaning of the word democracy. According to Husserl, the civilization is in crisis when the pragmatic science dominates. To solve this crisis Husserl invites rational thinking [39].

How to define de facto pragmatism? In the introduction we compared it with de facto standards. As soon as a new technology is being introduced, everyone is eager to utilize it as soon as possible. There are no significant attempts to create standards that should be followed, but instead, the solutions created by one vendor will quite soon become "de facto standards". Application is being accepted by general public without being defined and accepted officially, because this would take too much time.

Similar de facto –practice appears to exist in moral issues related to the Internet. Moral codes are being molded and taken into use taking only pragmatic issues into account. Actors are everything but professional. A new moral is being created in the Internet all the time; new virtual communities are being born all the time, and these form

rules and practices, which differ greatly from commonly accepted ethical codes in the society. From the ethical viewpoint this phenomenon is interesting – it appears that everything is happening faster in the Internet.

There are many causes behind this de facto practice. Husserl would say that it depends on the triumphal march of the applied sciences. Deborah Johnson would probably say that the American domination in the Internet is the main cause (Pragmatism has always been American philosophy). We think there are other reasons, too. Attitude education has certainly good possibilities to clarify the ethical background of the Internet. It is certainly necessary, because we all want to be sure that the Internet is going to be working smoothly in the future, and a fair, righteous and democratic Internet is reality. But because of the times we are living in, some of the typical Internet principles (anonymity) and the internationalization/globalization, are not that easy to carry out in reality.

#### V. SELF-REGULATION AS A HOBBSIAN ENTERPRISE

European Union has started a project, where great emphasis is on the encouragement for self-regulation of the Internet. The Safer Internet plus programme aims at promoting safer use of the Internet and new online technologies, particularly for children, and at fighting against illegal contents and contents unwanted by the end-user, as part of a coherent approach by the European Union. [40]

Behind self-regulation is a desire to promote the functioning of the same set of values and professional ethics. S. Visala states that when the Internet crossed the borders of the scientific community and became a commercial and civic enterprise, the whole gamut of human activities and interests came along. Money, flaming, plagiarism, copying of data files etc. finished the well working self-regulation. [41]

A classical example of self-regulation is the Leviathan of Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1679). Hobbes described the society that had plunged into anarchy. In such a society the inhabitants can't predict or make plans for the future. Unable to rely indefinitely on their individual powers in the effort to secure livelihood and contentment, Hobbes supposed, human beings join together in the formation of a commonwealth. Thus, the commonwealth as a whole embodies a network of associated contracts and provides for the highest form of social organization. On Hobbes's view, the formation of the commonwealth creates a new, artificial person (the Leviathan) to whom all responsibility for social order and public welfare is entrusted. [42] Leviathan was written during the English Civil War; much of the book is occupied with demonstrating the necessity of a strong central authority to avoid the evil of discord and civil war. The war or anarchy can be compared with the Internet, where there is are executive or legislative bodies.

Patricia Wallace has stated that the Internet and the co-operative groups work effectively and without quarrel or contradictions, if they are homogenous [43]. In this respect

the Internet is full of paradoxes. Globalization shrinks the world and spreads the Internet, but simultaneously the amount of potential troublemakers increases [44].

The Safer Internet project has listed ways to increase the functioning of the Internet with the help of self-regulation. There are certainly many technical devices. But the most important way to improve the working of the net is to increase education and enlightenment. This will also improve self-regulation [45].

## VI. CONCLUSIONS

It is obvious that the principles of virtual ethics (cyberethics) can be drawn from traditional ethics. On the other hand, according to the idea presented by Intona [46], electronic mediation is inducing a sense of hyperreality into our world, thus vitiating our ethical sense of being. Then again, Hobbesian Leviathan tells us how the development from an anarchistic state goes on voluntarily towards working operational environments. Here the acquired benefit is bigger than the other values, such as freedom, excitement or possibility to make big and quick profits.

There are some special features which are typical for the Internet, which may inhibit the development of solid sustainable ethical code. One of these characteristics is the fast growth and the hectic nature of the Internet. This is why the concept of de facto ethics is so well suited to describe the real ethical meaning of cyberethics – or is it better to call it a non-ethical theory (a theory that describes practical activity) that defines only technical, goal-oriented activity or goal rationality.

According to Beck [47], the social production of wealth systematically goes hand in hand with the social production of risks. According to him [48], risks and the potential of self-threat have been unleashed on a hitherto unprecedented scale as a consequence of the exponential growth in the forces of production as the process of modernization continues. This is a place for a well founded question: *How can ethical discussion take place, when the consequences of possible risks are well beyond comprehension?* Husserl explains convincingly how the ethical principles in a community “ought” to work. Husserl’s observer, or scientist (philosopher), is situated in the middle of the life flow, bound to the historicity and lifeworlds, and somehow he is able to outline the ethical condition of the culture. Husserl’s idea that we have to redeem our ethical goals over and over again can be seen as a well-defined comment against pragmatism and de facto ethics.

De facto ethics and pragmatism don’t operate on the same level with traditional ethics or ethical code. There are no distinct and unquestionable principles in pragmatism; efficiency, usability and fastness can be seen as one of the main criteria to the activity of good quality (valuable). But it might be so that sometimes it would be useful to study the ethical foundations of all the activities in a society. Husserl’s ideas bring ethical content to the non-ethical environments.

Husserl’s idea about the revaluation of ethical code, goals that had to be evaluated over and over again, is based

on the idea of western rationality, but it certainly conflicts with the ideas of freedom in the different sectors of the society. De facto ethics explains the factual situation in a society that is getting more and more technical all the time. Self-regulation on the other side is a typical way of trying to get the Internet function. Because of Internet’s voluntarily character that has not always been very successful. Many of the different self-regulation projects (The Safer Internet project, information literacy, rules of the computer games) have improved the functionality of at least some of the Internet environments. In self-regulation we can see some kind of eternal return to the times when the pioneer spirit of the Internet was dominant.

De facto ethics makes it possible to describe the factual ethical situation in the Internet; traditional ethics tells us how it should or could be. If we give priority to values like freedom, democracy and equality, there is certainly a big difference between the factual situation and the absolute ideas (ideals, natural values, as described in traditional ethics). The problem in this kind of evaluation is the definition of the absolute values which is important in quantitative research and is called operationalisation: in ethics it is extremely difficult to answer the question “How do I measure what I am interested in studying?”.

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