CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT AND COMPUTER ETHICS

By

Robert N. Barger, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Computer Applications Program
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, IN 46556
rbarger@nd.edu

It may sound strange that a course about computers could include elements of Catholic Social Teaching. For example, you may remember the saying that you can't teach arithmetic from a theological perspective…unless you use examples like "What is the sum of 2 angels plus 3 angels?" But for the past decade, in addition to teaching the usual computer programming courses, I have taught a course entitled Computer Ethics that includes elements of Catholic Social Teaching. An on-line syllabus for the course is available. [1] This course is among a group of courses that can be used to fulfill an ethics requirement in the Computer Applications Program in which I teach at the University of Notre Dame. The Program constitutes a second major in Notre Dame's College of Arts and Letters.

Unsurprisingly, the Computer Ethics course concentrates on the theory and practice of computer ethics. The aim of the course is the study of the theoretical basis for ethical decision-making and the methodology for reaching ethical decisions concerning computing matters. I would like to review the basic components of this course with you and explain how Catholic Social Teaching is incorporated within it.

First, several weeks are spent examining the ethical positions of the four major philosophies. [2] Each philosophy's idea of goodness is determined by its idea of reality (i.e., what you think reality is, or means, determines what you think is good). The first philosophy is Idealism. Idealism believes that reality is more spiritual or ideal than material and so the Idealist believes that goodness is found in the ideal, or in perfection, rather than in the material world. The second philosophy is Naturalism (or Realism). Naturalism believes that reality is more natural or material than spiritual and so the Naturalist believes that goodness is that which is harmony with nature, or is balanced between "too much" and "not enough." The third philosophy is Pragmatism. Pragmatism believes that reality is "in process" rather than static and so the Pragmatist believes that goodness is whatever is efficient for achieving socially desired goals. The fourth philosophy is Existentialism. Existentialism believes that reality (or meaning) is essentially determined by each individual and so goodness must be decided (or chosen) by each individual. Note that the first two philosophies are absolutist. That is, goodness is seen as an unchanging thing. The last two philosophies are relativist. That is, goodness can change depending on the situation or the person.

After considering these four philosophies, paragraphs 86 through 91 of Pope John Paul II's encyclical "Fides et Ratio" (Sept. 14, 1998) [3] are covered. This encyclical

provides the perspective of Catholic Social Teaching on some errors associated with the four philosophies. Specifically, the sections of the encyclical that are covered are concerned with the errors of Eclecticism, Historicism, Scientism, Pragmatism, Nihilism, and Postmodernism. Eclecticism is the use of ideas drawn from different philosophies without concern for their internal coherence. Historicism believes that truth is determined on the basis of its appropriateness to a certain historical period. Scientism refuses to admit any knowledge other than that gained by the positive sciences. Pragmatism does not admit the existence of unchanging values. Nihilism denies all objective truth. Postmodernism affirms the total absence of meaning.

Second, a document published by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications entitled "Ethics in Internet" (Feb. 22, 2002) [4] is covered. This document contains an application of the major points of Catholic Social Teaching to the phenomena of the Internet. The document describes itself as "a Catholic view of the Internet." It takes the position that "the fundamental ethical principle is this: The human person and the human community are the end and measure of the use of the media of social communications." Secondary principles mentioned are the common good and the virtue of solidarity. The document first speaks of the positive capabilities of the Internet. It mentions that the Internet "can serve people in their responsible use of freedom and democracy, expand the range of choices available in diverse spheres of life, broaden educational and cultural horizons, break down divisions, [and] promote human development in a multitude of ways." Then it goes on to describe some of the problems associated with the Internet. These are: privacy, the security and confidentiality of data, copyright and intellectual property law, pornography, hate sites, the dissemination of rumor and character assassination under the guise of news, the digital divide (an updated version of the gap between the information rich and the information poor), cultural imperialism ("as matters stand, the Internet, along with the other media of social communication, is transmitting the value-laden message of Western secular culture to people and societies in many cases ill-prepared to evaluate and cope with it,") blocking of access to information because governments or politicians find it threatening or embarrassing, and isolating individuals and societies from one another.

After looking at "Ethics in Internet," a methodology for decision-making in ethical cases is considered. A worksheet [5] containing eight questions is used for this purpose. The questions asked on the worksheet are:

1. What are the ethical issues in this case?

2. Who are the interested parties and what do you suppose each of them would like you to do?

3. Propose three possible solutions (two extremes and a compromise), and give (a) a best-case and worst-case outcome for each solution, and (b) for each solution, state whether you could tolerate the worst-case outcome.

Choose which one of the three solutions you think is the best and answer questions 4 thru 7 about that solution:

4. a. Would you be willing for everyone to be permitted to use this solution?
   b. Does it treat people as ends rather than only as means [Idealism]? Explain.

5. Is this solution in accord with what is natural (not excessive or deficient) [Naturalism/Realism]? Explain.

6. a. Would there be majority agreement that this solution is the most efficient means to the end?
   b. Will it produce the greatest good for the greatest number of people [Pragmatism/Utilitarianism]? Explain.

7. Is this solution the one you feel most committed to in your own conscience, regardless of whether or not it benefits you personally [Existentialism]? Explain.

8. Which philosophy do you feel was most influential in your solution? Why?

For the final examination in the course the students are asked to enter an essay contest sponsored by the Computer Professionals for Social Responsibility (CPSR) [6]. The students may choose any one of a number of topics suggested by CPSR concerning social problems and computing. I ask the students to try to apply the teachings of "Ethics in Internet" in writing their essays.

In this way, I try to integrate the computer ethics material that the students are learning with the social teaching of the Church. Moreover, through the format of the final exam, I ask the students to apply the Church's social teaching to current problems in computer ethics.

I have learned that using the Catholic Social Teaching approach to Computer Ethics may not get you published by a secular publisher. Here is a copy of an e-mail message that I received from a publisher who had asked me if she might review my computer ethics materials for a possible book: "The reviewers had many positive comments about your material, but in the end concluded that the book wasn't secular enough for most schools. For this reason, I think Longman's [is] probably not the best fit for your book." [7]

That's alright with me. The Pope and the Vatican have already done a better job than I could have anyway.

References:

[1] http://www.nd.edu/~rbarger/capp471syl.html

[2] http://www.nd.edu/~rbarger/philblfs

[3] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_15101998_fides-et-ratio_en.html

[4] http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_ethics-internet_en.html

[5] http://www.nd.edu/~rbarger/ethicswork.html

[6] http://www.cpsr.org/essays/2003/contest.html

[7] P. McGeehon. Personal communication, February 25, 2003.