

In the evolution of computer ethics there has been an intermittent discussion of the statement that "Computer ethics is unique". The discussion seems to re-emerge with each new change in technology and change in predominant area of interest about the way computers are changing our social institutions. One of the earliest positive definitions of computer ethics was given by James Moor [1985]. In this paper Moor argues that computer ethics is unique by first defining a computer ethics situation as one in which a computer is "essentially involved". This is an example of one difference in CEIU, namely some interpret CEIU to mean "Computers have made an evolutionary change in the ethical landscape and we have to work hard using traditional ethics to remap that landscape", while others interpret CEIU to mean that "Computers have made a revolutionary change in the ethical landscape such that the principles space and time can no longer be used to guide us in traversing the landscape." The evolutionary version of CEIU is about particular ethical decisions, while the revolutionary version is about the methodology of ethical reasoning. This is but one of several variations in CEIU. In this paper, we maintain that: this is not a simple statement, but that it has several quite distinct meanings, 1 of 8

16/2/2002 6:30 ii TEACHING\CE\cepe file:///E:/users/gouscos/daiadeoocieaeU/Aeaass...he Evolution of the Uniqueness Revolution.htm this assertion has some significant and dangerous consequences, until these meanings of uniqueness are clearly defined, discussions based on CEIU results in inconsistencies and a failure to understand the consequences of this claim, and the revolutionary interpretation of CEIU has not yet been proven. 2 CEIU: traditional responses 2.1 The assertion of CEIU is benign Discussions about the uniqueness of computer ethics is sometimes viewed by philosophers and novice computer ethics scholars as just another benign philosophical discussion. The answer to this question is viewed as simply a part of the definition of computer ethics. Saying computer ethics is unique is almost like giving an ostensive definition. People who have dealt with this question have rarely claimed to be establishing results in the discipline of computer ethics. CEIU's primary use is as a justification for the discipline of computer ethics or the study of these special unique problems. The uniqueness discussion is sometimes viewed as so irrelevant to the progress of the discipline, that the discussants show little interest in how others have approached the question or in testing the correctness or precise meaning of other's claims that computer ethics is unique. This claim is sometimes made to justify the creation of another discipline or academic department, for example, Walter Maner [1995] states, " Computer ethics is unique so its study is justified." Deborah Johnson [1997] recently suggested that several aspects of the Internet have had an impact on the issues within computer ethics She appeals to the pervasive "anonymity" of individuals and "reproducibility" of information in ways not possible without the Internet. Krystyna Gorniak [1996] also appeals to the Internet and argues that there are no good analogies available for cyber-situations. On the surface it may appear that these authors are making similar claims based on the deceptively simple claim "Computer ethics is unique" (Hereafter CEIU). This involvement contributes to the uniqueness of the situation because of the computer's unique properties of "logical malleability" and "speed". He argues that the pervasive alteration of social and cultural situations by this machine has created policy "vacuums" about how to use computer technology which require us to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach to determine how to fill these vacuums. The uniqueness of the way the computer transforms the world will "...require us to go back to the old question: what is ethical". The old ethics has

been made irrelevant by the unique nature of the computer revolution. According to Gorniak, we are in an ethical "vacuum" in which the prior ethics (Utilitarianism, Kantianism, etc.) are increasingly irrelevant. For Moor, uniqueness refers to the new situations. More recently Krystyna Gorniak, arguing that Moor has not gone far enough [Gorniak 1996] maintains that although there may be an area called computer ethics, it is so unique that traditional ethical concepts do not apply to it and we have to wait for the Newtonian revolution in ethics to develop or discover the concepts that do apply. The presumption that there can be no 2 of 8 16/2/2002 6:30 ii TEACHING\CE\cepe file:///E:/users/gouscos/daiadeoocieaeU/Aeaass...he Evolution of the Uniqueness Revolution.htm agreement in ethics can be so strong that it corrupts one's view of the evidence. Notice how "uniqueness" has shifted from referring to a socio-cultural phenomena and it now refers to the principles of normative ethics, which are so unique they are yet to be discovered. The answer to the uniqueness question is not insignificant. What is puzzling is that, as we have just seen, the same answer "Yes, computer ethics is unique." Moor's claim for uniqueness leads to a search for usable analogies; Johnson uses traditional norms to derive some general rules for behavior; while Gorniak's claim about cyber-situations means that traditional ethics is not applicable to cyber-situations. He gathered the opinions of people from several professions, ranging from accountants, attorneys, psychologists and philosophy professors to computer professionals. We shall see that there are many meanings to CEIU.