

No, PAPA: Why Incomplete Codes of Ethics are Worse Than None At All.

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In Collste, G (ed) 1998 *_Ethics and Information Technology_* (Delhi: New Academic Publishers) pp259-277, ISBN 91-7219-680-7, previously presented to International Conference on Computer Ethics at Linköping University, 9-10 June 1997. Revised version pp 259-277 in Collste, G (ed) 2000 *_Ethics in the Age of Information Technology_* (Linköping, Sweden: Centre for Applied Ethics, Linköpings Universitet), ISSN: 1402-4152 ISBN: 91-7219-680-7

Abstract.

There is sustained, and still current, interest in Mason's 1986 article "Four Ethical Issues of the Information Age". In it Mason states that "The ethical issues involved are many and varied", before claiming that "it is helpful to focus on just four [Privacy, Accuracy, Property and Accessibility]... summarized by ... an acronym - PAPA." There are good reasons for moral consideration of the 'PAPA' issues. Immorality in those areas can destroy some lives.

The problem is that by focusing on these four areas of concern, attention may be taken away from other, potentially more important, moral issues. Not all important moral issues in information technology can be put under those headings. Yet focusing on four areas gives the erroneous impression that adherence to the moral requirements in those areas alone could ensure moral rectitude.

The same considerations are highly likely to apply to any moral code that is developed (whether in computing or elsewhere). Authors of incomplete moral codes risk encouraging others to act in immoral ways with the author's apparent sanction.

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Related, broader, questions are considered, and it is advocated that there should always be acknowledgement of the existence of 'external', potentially more important, moral issues.

Notes:

Notes: Mason's article was published in 'MIS Quarterly' Vol10(1) pp5-12. Among the recent interest in Mason's article are two papers based entirely on the 'PAPA' issues: Platt and Morrison (</conferences/ethicomp/abstracts/platt.html>) at Ethicomp95, and Professor Porfirio Barroso (director of the conference) at Ethicomp96.