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Guest Editor's Preface

" 'One of these days d'you think you'll be able to see things at the end of the telephone?' Peggy said, getting up." She will not return to her wondering again, in the remaining pages of Virginia Woolf's *The Years* (1937). Distracted by a technology that invites practical employment more readily than critical reflection, Peggy half-perceives that new communication and information technologies are transforming society profoundly and irrevocably, but she cannot yet make sense of such a significant change in human history, at this early stage of development. The information society has its scientific roots in the thirties— Alan Turing introduced the basic idea of a computational machine in 1936— but it became a reality only thanks to the enormous military funding available during WWII and the Cold War. Its development acquired its momentum in the seventies, when PCs started to be sold like ordinary commodities, but it finally became a macroscopic phenomenon only at the end of the eighties, when the Internet and then the World Wide Web transformed computers into terminals. This explains why philosophers have just recently begun to address the new intellectual challenges that arise from the infosphere, the digital environment in which millions of people spend their time nowadays. The result of their investigations has been the emergence of a new and vitally important area of research. There is no label for it yet, so we may well call it the philosophy of information.

Computer Ethics (CE) can be introduced as a branch of the philosophy of information. Digital Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) affect not only our conceptualisation of the world but also human practices, thus raising ethical issues that are often, if not uncontroversially, thought to be new and unique. They concern, for example, property, privacy, responsibility, ownership,

the distribution of power, fundamental liberties and moral responsibility. And they challenge some of the basic organising concepts of moral and political philosophy. CE studies these distinctive ethical issues. Its goal is to identify and clarify problems, and hence formulate answers to questions about the morality of ICT-based actions, as well as the ethical underpinnings of public policies in the Information Society.

During the last two decades, CE has consistently adopted a bottom-up procedure, carrying out an extended and intensive analysis of individual cases, amounting very often to real-world issues. Its aim has been to reach decisions based on principled choices and defensible ethical principles, and hence to provide more generalised conclusions in terms of conceptual evaluations, moral insights, normative guidelines, professional codes, educational programs or legal advice which might apply to whole classes of comparable cases.

Despite such extensive evidence and analysis, it is still commonly held that CE-problems may work as counterexamples, show the limits or stretch the conceptual resources of already available *macroethics* that is theoretical, field-independent, applicable ethics, like Consequentialism or Deontology, but can never give rise to a substantially new ethical perspective. According to this deflationary approach, there is no special category of computer ethics, but just ordinary ethical situations in which computers and digital technology are involved, and therefore CE is at most a *microethics*, that is a practical, field-dependent, applied and professional ethics. Understood as a decision-making and action-oriented theory, CE appears only as a technical subject, which can hardly add anything to already well-developed ethical theories.

Behind CE's foundationalist problem there lies a lack of a strong theoretical programme. ICT, by transforming in a profound way the context in which some old ethical issues arise, not only adds interesting new dimensions to old problems, but seems to invite us to rethink, methodologically, the very grounds on which some of our ethical positions are based.

The six invited essays collected in this special issue of *Etica & Politica* all address the problem of the conceptual basis of CE and its philosophical relevance to the ethical discourse, though in different ways and with different goals. The first two essays, by Deborah G. Johnson and Walter Maner, articulate a negative and a positive answer to the question whether problems in CE can be considered unique and therefore may require the development of a "new ethics". James Moor's essay, by focusing on the concept of justice, represents a valuable bridge between this foundationalist issue and the study of specific issues in CE, which are provided by Helen Nissenbaum (trust) and Jeroen van den Hoven (cyber-democracy). The last article, by Floridi and Saunders, returns to the foundationalist issue and further elaborates an Information Ethics understood as a macroethics.

What may be worth emphasising, before inviting the reader to evaluate the different positions, is that all authors agree on the fact that CE does have something distinctive and substantial to say on moral problems. Whether it can only contribute an interesting perspective to the ethical discourse, or it actually leads to development of a new position that cannot be merely brought under other standard ethical theories is still matter of lively debate and further research. It is my hope, however, that this special issue of *Etica & Politica* will contribute to clarify the problems further.