6
Internet Dating, Cyberstalking and Internet Pornography: Gender and the Gaze

Introduction: feminist approaches to computer ethics problems

Chapter 5 argued for two broad directions in tackling the question of developing more solidly theorized approaches towards gender in computer ethics. One line of study involves undertaking empirical studies and analysing these in terms of theories from feminist ethics as in the empirical study reported in the preceding chapter. Additionally there is a clear need to turn the spotlight onto known problems in computer ethics and to reanalyse these from the point of view of a more thorough gender analysis than has usually been made, grounded in aspects of feminist theory. This is the approach taken in this chapter in relation to Internet dating, cyberstalking and Internet pornography and in Chapters 7 and 8 in relation to hacking and privacy respectively. This direction is particularly pertinent in relation to problems which involve the body, privacy violations physical or otherwise of bodies and bodily spaces, watching of and gazing at bodies. This is because of the long standing tradition, prevalent in Western philosophy, of associating bodily matters primarily with women rather than men. There is a tendency for advocates of cyberculture, from roboticists to cyberpunk science fiction writers, to ignore and even deny the primacy of the body. This reflects a turn to the virtual, which, at its extreme, sees the body as mere ‘meat’ (Adam 1998). At the same time, the body has become one of the major topics in the wide ranging literature of contemporary feminist writing (Diprose 1994; Gatens 1996). In summary, and speaking broadly, feminist authors have noted the way that the role of the body has been written out of much of Western
philosophy where the mind has assumed the primary rational instrument and this further underscores the long running association of masculinity with the mind and reason and femininity with body and irrationality. These views have been the basis of a substantial critique and feminist revision of epistemology (Alcoff and Potter 1993). If the body has been left out of traditional epistemology, it also appears to be largely absent from traditional ethical theories. We are left with the uncomfortable feeling that Kant’s moral agents may not have physical bodies. With his emphasis on pure reason, Rumsey (1997) notes that Kant’s isolated and self-seeking adult individuals neglect the community and biology. Kant leaves biology and the body to women where his account of human agency is built on women’s exclusion.

This suggests that we may have to look to applied ethics to bring the body, its surveillance and violations of its privacy, back into ethical thinking. Health and bioethics are obvious places to look for a more body-centred ethics, yet we should note feminist critiques of the tendency in modern biology, for instance, as evidenced by the human genome project, to reduce the body to a coded, digital expression (Haraway 1991). These concerns are equally important in critiques of science and technology ethics where recent works (Spier 2001) seem to treat the body as a part of biological engineering. They are especially pertinent to computer ethics, which must work hard to reclaim the body that has so often been written out of the script of computer scientists and cyberculture commentators.

If philosophy has a tendency to equate women with the bodily realm, it may well be instructive to look afresh at gender relations to reclaim or reinvent the body, certainly within computer ethics. By arguing that it may be instructive to bring feminist theory to computer ethics problems, as much feminist thinking has centred on the body this may also go some way to reclaiming the body in computer ethics. For instance, in regard to topics such as privacy, we may begin to think in terms of bodily invasions of privacy, where bodies are watched, looked at or subject to surveillance or indeed where bodies are actually violated and the violations are watched online. At the same time we must acknowledge that concepts of privacy may be different for men and women and may vary according to age, class and other cultural and historical variables as discussed in Chapter 8. Therefore my theoretical position involves attempting to weave together a feminist approach to privacy, bodies and the concept of the gaze in relation to the related areas of Internet dating, cyberstalking and Internet pornography, focusing on Internet paedophile rings in the latter area.