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“Rethinking Ethics and Computing”
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The field of computer ethics is now roughly twenty years old and seems to be thriving in terms of scholarship and pedagogy. Scholarship in the field can be characterized as focusing on the ethical issues arising ‘around’ and ‘from’ the development of computing, that is from the new capacities and endeavors made possible by computers. The topics that are typically addressed in textbooks, journals, and monographs include issues of professional ethics, privacy and surveillance, intellectual property, liability-accountability-responsibility, as well as particular types of computing such as data mining, search engines, modeling and simulation, virtual reality, online media, etc. This approach has been successful in drawing attention to issues and providing analysis that helps to better understand the issues and inform policy. Nevertheless, the approach has certain limitations that need to be addressed. When computer ethical issues are conceived as issues arising ‘around’ and ‘from’ computing, computers and computer systems themselves are hidden from the sights of computer ethics. Computer ethicists are left to address computer systems after they have been designed and appear at their doorsteps. This puts computer ethics in a reactive role and blocks the opportunity to be proactive and to address ethical issues at earlier stages in the development of computer systems. A focus on ethics ‘in’ computer technology is needed. Here computer systems would be understood to be value-laden, moral entities. In order to make this shift to ethics ‘in’ computer systems, two steps are necessary. First, computer technology must be understood to be not just machines and physical objects, but rather, to be socio-technical systems; computer systems are combinations of social practices, social relationships, social institutions, and artifacts. Second, computer ethics must be understood to include a focus on the design of computer systems. The implications of these two shifts call for a retooling of the field of computer ethics including a better understanding of socio-technical systems.

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