Commentary on the 'Ten Commandments for Computer Ethics'

N Ben Fairweather

nbf@dmu.ac.uk

As with all short codes of ethics, this code is short of detail of sorts which would give practical guidance in many situations. This is an inevitable consequence of the brevity that at the same time makes the code easy to remember and refer to.

It is easy to find exceptions to the short dos and don'ts of the 'ten commandments' (see below). The ease with which these can be found, described and repeated gives rise to the possibility of generally good guidance falling into unwarranted disrepute: indeed, every time such a short code of ethics falls into unwarranted disrepute, the whole idea of acting morally is brought into disrepute too.

The 'ten commandments' might *possibly* be a useful starting point for computer ethics, but they definitely are not a complete code - so just because you keep within the ten commandments does not mean that what you are doing is OK (see other 'commentary (`linkoping.html`)'). For comparison, look at the "Software Engineering Code of Ethics and Professional Practice (ACM/IEEE-CS) (`se_draft_old.html`)".

Additionally, some of the 'ten commandments' appear to be decidedly trivial compared to the others: yet the listing suggests that all ten are equally important.

1. Thou shalt not use a computer to harm other people.

   Is it just people that we should not harm? What about the environment and animals (the environment is clearly harmed by the production and use of computers, and by the disposal of waste computers)?

2. Thou shalt not interfere with other people's computer work.

3. Thou shalt not snoop around in other people's files.

   What if the 'other people' are using the computer to do harm? Should we still refrain from interfering? Should computer files be private even if they are being used as part of a criminal conspiracy?

4. Thou shalt not use a computer to steal.

5. Thou shalt not use a computer to bear false witness.

   What if stealing or bearing false witness is the only way to prevent someone from doing a much greater harm?

6. Thou shalt not use or copy software for which you have not paid.

   This is too simplistic. Many of us use software on University or business computer systems where somebody else has paid for us to use the software. Beyond this, though, what if the software house that produced the software has used immoral methods to gain an excessively large share of the software market, which thus prevents competition, and enables it to over-charge for software? Under these circumstances is it wrong to use or copy software without paying the software house?

7. Thou shalt not use other people's computer resources without authorization.

   What if it is an emergency, and the only way to stop a great harm is to use computer resources without authorization?

8. Thou shalt not appropriate other people's intellectual output.

   Even here, it is possible that somebody has a brilliant idea that can produce great social benefit, but which will not be taken seriously if the true author is known. By appropriating their intellectual output, society as a whole will gain substantially.

9. Thou shalt think about the social consequences of the program you write.

Thought, unaccompanied by action, is pointless. They must act upon those thoughts. Further, it is not just in writing of software that thought of social consequences and action should follow: although both are necessary in the writing of software.

10. Thou shalt use a computer in ways that show consideration and respect.

    There may be situations in the world where more good can be done by not showing respect for all, and the possibility of doing such good should not be dismissed out of hand.

Permission to duplicate or distribute the 'ten commandments (`cei_command.html`)' is granted by the The Computer Ethics Institute (`http://www.brook.edu/ITS/CEI/CEI_HP.HTM`) (CEI) with the provision that the document remains intact or if used in sections, that the original document source be referenced.

Brief (non-critical) interpretation (`http://www.cmpe.boun.edu.tr/~say/c150/intro/lit10.html`) of the ten commandments has been produced by Cem Say (`mailto:say@boun.edu.tr`) at Bogaziçi University, Turkey.