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The Hacker Ethic

Ethic is about right and wrong, good and bad; it has *to do with character*, it has to do with codes and principles for behaviour. The hacker ethic, then, is about the hacker's conceptions of right and wrong, about ethical hacker's character-traits, their codes and principles of behaviour. In order to present any account of the hacker ethic, we need to know what a hacker is.

Three steps to be taken

First step: what is a hacker.

Second step: how, when and why did the hacker ethic appear?

Third step: what could be at stake when we talk about the hacker ethic?

First step: What is a "hacker"?

The today's hacker culture has its roots in Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) – at least what is described to be the old school hackers. The first group of people calling themselves hackers were from the university's local Tech Model Railroad Club (TMRC).

According to the TMRC-dictionary^j a "hacker" is "one who hacks, or makes them"; a "hack" is:

- 1) an article or project without constructive end;
- 2) work undertaken on bad self-advice;
- 3) an entropy booster;
- 4) to produce, or attempt to produce, a hack (3).

The hacker culture has become associated with the computer culture. Part of the explanation is that members of the TMRC-Club attended at the first computer courses delivered at M.I.T and later brought their culture into the M.I.T. AI Lab. [Entries from the 1983-version of the Jargon File, see below.] At the M.I.T AI Lab there were an ethic that said that whoever sat at the computers should be free to do whatever they wanted to – previous users should not restrict present users capabilitiesⁱⁱ. They built the ITS (**I**ncompatible **T**imesharing **S**ystem), they built EMACS and thrived through sharing their knowledge and source code. Hackers can be found in

many different domains – you don't have to associate hackers with computers – you can hack in any medium; i.e. you can hack philosophy, hack physics, hack driving cars, hack while eating Chinese food (as for example: a famous hacker once managed to eat with 6 chopsticks at once).

Common to the hackers' activities is playfulness, cleverness and explorationⁱⁱⁱ. In taking a more personal approach on the hacker; my own experience the last couple of years come from my daughter: playfulness, cleverness and exploration are exactly what characterises her activities. By default, I think we should be allowed to call a very wide range of people hackers.

Second step. The appearance of the term, "hacker ethic".

Journalist Steven Levy coined the term "hacker ethic"^{iv} in his *Hackers* (1984). Levy himself explains how he came up with the term:

"As I talked to these digital explorers, ranging from those who tamed multimillion-dollar machines in the 1950s to contemporary young wizards who mastered computers in their suburban bedrooms, I found a common element, a common philosophy which seemed tied to the elegantly flowing logic of the computer itself. It was a philosophy of sharing, openness, decentralization, and getting your hands on machines at any cost – to improve the machines, and to improve the world. This Hacker Ethic is their gift to us: something with value even to those of us with no interest at all in computers." (Levy, 1984, 1994:7)

The Jargon File - also known as *The Hacker's Dictionary* - contains a definition of the "hacker ethic", however, the term was not included in Guy L. Steele Jr.'s (et al) 1983-version. The Jargon File must have picked up the term later on, at least so it seems. Today, the first part of the entry says:

Hacker ethic. The belief that information-sharing is a powerful positive good, and that it is an ethical duty of hackers to share their expertise by writing open-source code and facilitating access to information and to computing resources wherever possible.

(*JARGON FILE*^v, <http://catb.org/jargon>)

Perhaps some hundred thousands of people have a shared conception of the "hacker ethic"; they know that it is about a sharing community, about writing free software/open source and about freedom. Some think that the hacker ethic can change the society for the better. Others, that the hacker ethic is some utopian, idealistic or communist crap. However, the majority of people have not heard about the hacker ethic. Some have not even heard of hackers – and still many people have a misconception of what a hacker is; i.e. a hacker is not

a cracker. (In short: hackers has to do with playfulness, cleverness, and exploration – hacking does not imply any criminal behaviour, whereas crackers are those who poke around in networks, break into systems, destroy, commit criminal acts in order to gain for themselves only etc.)

Still fewer has tried hard to think through the common objections, argue for and against and finally write about the hacker ethic. At least one of them see the “hacker ethic” as a serious challenge to contemporary society’s norms and values. He has found that hacker ethic has through technological creations such as the Internet already shaped our society. The hacker ethic can still change the society to the better.

Third step. “Hacker ethic” appears in the first book title.

In 2001, Pekka Himanen (Finnish philosopher) wrote *The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age*. It is the first title of a book proclaiming to give an account of the so-called hacker ethic. The books prologue is by famous hacker Linus Torvalds (father of the Linux-kernel) and the epilogue is by sociologist Manuel Castells. The main theme in Himanen’s book is this: the hacker ethic as a challenge to contemporary society (in order to change society for the better). In Himanen’s view contemporary society is in large parts still the same as described by Weber. Weber plays an important role in Himanen’s account of the hacker ethic. Therefore the following part is devoted to Weber’s own account of the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism. After presenting Weber’s account, we will return to our main concern: Himanen’s account of the hacker ethic.

Fourth step. Max Weber’s *De protestantische Ethik un der Geist des Kapitalismus*.

In 1904-1905 Max Weber (German thinker, historian, father of sociology) published *De protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus*^{vi}.

In his work, Weber accounts for important historical presuppositions that he found had led to his contemporary culture and society; i.e. Weber were looking for causes that had shaped the Western capitalistic world that he lived in. Weber felt that the spirit of capitalism – for better or worse - controlled contemporary society at the time.

In order to describe his findings, Weber made use of two ideal-types:

1. the protestant ethic, and
2. the spirit of capitalism.

The protestant ethic describes religious, otherworldly and ascetics who follow Gods commands – according to different reformed religious sects; sects who evolved from Reformation beginning with Martin Luther’s call for a more strict, puritanical and inner-worldly Christianity. Followers of the protestant ethic – people seeking the otherworldly, but living in this world could not be certain that they would end up together with God after the died. They would be in doubt whether or not God would let them enter heaven after finishing their earthly life. They would in fact be so very much in doubt.

They worked harder than others and stayed more focused. They would not let girls, booze and jolly parties disturb their calling; i.e. serve God faithfully, enter the Kingdom of God, call it heaven, Eden or paradise. By *choosing* work harder and do better than the rest, *they* thought that *they* could get a hint, or just a tiny amount of certainty whether or not they would end up in heaven. Staying truth to God and being faithful in doing an excellent job became a sign of devotion to God; a call of duty ... to God. The protestant chose this way of life – at that time he was *free* to choose.

Choosing that way of life actually led religious Protestants to higher social ranking than other religious sects. At least, that was one of Weber’s conclusions^{vii}. Protestants followed the call of God through the Bible (in localized language-versions) instead of the call of Catholic Pope in Rome (in Latin). The Protestants had thereby detached themselves from a traditional Christianity, which favoured a this-worldly economic order.

The Protestants were free agents who connected themselves into a rational-capitalistic economy oriented by the market (and not political power nor irrational speculations). A clear divide between the economy of the household and that of the enterprise, and the commercialisation Economical, legal and social systems became mere effective, optimised and strict. The new systems would provide higher rates of economical growth. Their children perhaps lacked the same degree of dedication, and their children’s children at times lacked the faith, and the grandchildren became secularised. The faithful way of life was substituted by this-worldly life; the economical, legal and social systems were by that time turned into self-subsisting systems. In the last pages of his book Max Weber wrote, quote:

The Puritan wanted to work in a calling; we are forced to do so. For when asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order. This order is now bound to the technical and economic conditions of machine production which to-day determine the lives of all the

individuals who are born into this mechanism, not only those directly concerned with economic acquisition, with irresistible force. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. Perhaps it will so determine them until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt. In Baxter's view the care for external goods should only lie on the shoulders of the "saint like a light cloak, which can be thrown aside at any moment." But fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage. (End quote.)

In this iron cage the order of the day was that *you* had to conform to the system, or else *you* are out of job and out of money. The companies hiring people to work for them had to compete or perish – the system had lost its face, it had become an alien an overwhelming system. Weber's intention was to decode his contemporary society, to understand which important presuppositions that had formed the Western world. Why was it that Greek philosophy, mathematics and rational the theology had appeared in the West. Why was it that rational economy first appeared in the post 14th century? The Western world can indeed be seen as an extremely complex mechanism. Building complex systems can be done in several ways, but there should be a freedom of choice, freedom to cooperate and a freedom to change the most important systems for the better. Building better systems and a better society is what the hacker ethic is all about.

Fifth step. Himanen's *The Hacker Ethic and the Spirit of the Information Age*

The similarity between Weber's and Himanen's title is everything but by chance. Himanen is in fact picking up on Max Weber's work – their intention is somewhat the same.

However, in order to give an account of the hacker ethic, Himanen explicitly and consciously equates the "protestant ethic" with the "capitalist spirit". By doing this he eliminates the historical dimension found in Weber's book. Having done that, Himanen is able to oppose the "protestant ethic" with the "hacker ethic" throughout is own book.

Himanen finds that the hacker ethic distinguishes from the protestant ethic in the three dominant domains:

1. The work ethic.

The hacker's work ethic says that work should be done with an intrinsic interest and enthusiasm, which makes his work a joy. His work is not just a work, but first of all a passion. Hackers are not the only people with this relationship to his work. Himanen finds similar descriptions of a passionate relationship in various places: in the Ancient Plato's dialogues,

from different artists and professionals within many domains. The capitalist/protestant's work ethic says that you should work in order to get paid, receive recognition and contribute to your society. The work in itself is not motivating for the protestant, whereas to the hacker the work is in itself interesting and motivating.

2. The money ethic.

The capitalist/protestant's work ethic says that earning money enables you to gain control over networks and information, and thereby make even more money; even when you are not fighting for survival you should continue to act as if you were. The capitalist seeks profit through copyright, patents, brands, non-disclosure agreements and any other means – and they act as if it is a matter of survival. The hacker's money ethic says that you can be paid to do what you like to do, but you should not restrict or exclude others from making money through copyright or non-disclosure agreements. As Himanen points out, quote:

“ The original hacker ethic was primarily a matter of what place money is accorded as a motive and what types of its influence on other motives should be avoided.” (End quote, Himanen:54)

In Himanen's account hacker ethic it says that sharing information can cause a tremendous amount of wealth and innovation. Himanen points out that collaborating scientists – as seen at Plato's Academy and many other places – have shown that publishing scientific knowledge has proven to be the very effective.

Stephen “Woz” Wozniak (Apple, “capitalist hacker”, gained freedom through lots of money).
Richard M. Stallman (FSF, “idealist hacker”, initiated the GNU Project, where free software were created in order to build a community that gives hackers and common users the freedom to use, improve, share and distribute their software).

Bill Gates (Microsoft, the gifted ex-hacker, donates huge piles of money to the third world – is he some sort of a Robin Hood after all?).

3. The network ethic (nethic).

The most radical implications of the hacker ethic is formulated under the heading “nethic”; a short term for “**networks ethic**”.

The protestant/capitalist's network ethic allows a radical divide between household and enterprise, between people, companies, cities and countries. It allows economical and political

powers to exclude others from their network, and it allows information providers to divide and dominate information users.

The hacker's network ethic seeks to include and avoid exclusion; i.e. there is no discrimination based on age, educational level, religion, skin-colour or whether you are a competitor on the economical market. The hacker's network ethic says that you should be able to join, and when you enter the common network you should still have constitutional rights like that of the human rights (freedom of speech, right to privacy etc.). When people are excluded you're your network, you can't use that network to care for him - by allowing everyone to enter the network, in a common community, members have a chance to care. I can help you and you can help me, we can laugh, discuss, and collaborate - that is basically what the hacker's network ethic says. Bring people together, let them hack, collaborate, care about real problems; this is the perfect setting for creativity - the perfect setting for hacking systems in order to remove irrational limits, change systems for the better and thereby provide everyone in the system a better life.

Seven values of the hacker ethic.

In Himanen's account, the hacker ethic is characterised by seven values: passion, freedom, the hackers' work ethic, their money ethic, their network ethic (nethic), caring and creativity (i.e. creativity understood as the ability to come up with surprising and self-transcending ways of contributing with truly and real values.) (HE:141)

Sixth step. Bringing it all together.

You have now heard that ethics *has to do with character*. You have heard that hackers have certain character-traits. That the term hacker ethic were coined in 1984 by journalist Steven Levy. In 2001, philosopher Pekka Himanen undertook a serious-hackerish study of the hacker ethic. Himanen found that the society described by Max Weber one hundred years earlier, still exists and are dominating people's life. Weber's intention was to explain why rational-economical society, the modern capitalist society, first appeared in the Western world. Modern society seen as a formally free, but monstrous commercialised system; a system consisting of networks that are allowed to exclude members of society to gain profit. Himanen's account of the hacker ethic pin-point problems in three domains: the money ethic, the work ethic and the network ethic. He finds that the hacker ethic are to some extent superior to the protestant ethic - but what is most important is the ability to chose passionate, meaningful life where work and money in themselves are no longer systematically controls our lives.

Service pack.

My main concern in Himanen's account is that the question of rationality isn't accounted for. Himanen's catalogue of ideas is rich – I am not in a position to present his thousands of sharp observations – however,

Whose rationality will thrive in the Information Age dominated by the hacker ethic? The hacker ethic is about finding a meaningful life – and hacking systems can lead to better systems.

Whose justice will prevail – will it be easier for young and bright students to live in this new hacker-ethical society than it is for grandmother and grandfathers? Focusing on rationality like Weber did brought him to some key understandings of the Western society. I am not convinced that the protestant ethic – a ethic that tells you to work hard, stay focused, keep goal-oriented etc. – didn't do a great job to provide modern society. In fact, to me it seems that what we have a system shaped by free agent and free markets; it is at times dysfunctional and we need to stay alert.

At times it isn't working, it doesn't bring us the freedom to live a good life. For that we need hacks and other kind of improvements.

I've found that focus on rationality with rationality indeed is characterising some of the greatest hackers of all time. Hackers like Socrates, Plato, Kant and - yes - Richard M. Stallman. We have seen that the GNU General Public License has changed kept free software alive. One of the main reasons is that the license obeys the copyright-law – it not only obeys the printed law, but it obeys the original spirit of that law – it obeys the copyright-law, and is used contrary to the mainstream usage; i.e. diving, dominating and cashing money from people by imposing ridiculous restrictions on how to share your software, books and in general: useful knowledge. If Stallman didn't knew how the legal system worked, if he didn't had taken time to track the implicit rationality of the system – his hack probably wouldn't have worked. The hacker ethic is about sharing and community for sure, but in order to get to that point important steps are to be taken. It has to do with freedom, moral feelings and taking action; when done in the hacker-movements some call it hacktivism, following a nethic or some belief that they don't have to call it anything. What is important here is not the name, but being able to reuse the wisdom – therefore it makes "double" sense to call it something simple and understandable. [In relation to Yuwei's presentation – the Tower of Bable effect could result in

damage; it could make divided, that could be exploited in destructive ways for the free software communities.]

Conclusion.

Ethic is about right and wrong. Hacking is about playfulness, cleverness and explorations. The hacker ethic is about the right and wrong of hackers who adhere to some common traits, some common codes and principle of behaviour.

The hacker ethic argues that:

Freedom weighs more than money.

Hacking irrational, unjust systems can turn them into rational, just systems.

Inclusive networks are more efficient than excluding networks.

Some call it a “free society” and other call it the “GPL’ed society”. What is most important is that it is a good society.” Well, what is a good society then? This is yet another important question to be discussed.

Cases.

Lessons to learn (again).

Case 1 – Kantian ethic and the Golden Rule in free software.

Free Software were termed by Richard M. Stallman. In the 1960’s and 1970’s all software were free software, but with the commercialisation of software the M.I.T. AI Lab became divided – and the community-ethic slowly died. In his essays such as the *The GNU Manifesto* (written in 1984) and *The GNU Project* (1989) Stallman wrote that dividing and dominating user, and not sharing useful information was essentially wrong. In his 1984 he explicitly refers to the Kantian ethic and the Golden Rule. In connection to what have been said, we can track the divide between household and enterprise – the divide released great powers – whether or not we ought to bridge that gap, or perhaps just hack the separate systems and make them compatible is hard to decide upon.

Case 2 – Free universities.

To modify binary code is next to impossible; therefore provide users with the source code and proper documentation.

The writing of the source code for a working operating system like GNU/Linux has been a tremendously difficult job to complete – lots and lots of people have been involved in lots and lots of specialized topics.

To modify an advanced theory put forth in a scientific paper is next to impossible without access to references. Access to information, open source and free documentation has been practised at the universities for centuries – it is no sheer luck that it worked, and it is not by chance that Richard M. Stallman’s philosophy has remarkable resemblance with academic principles. If you didn’t know M.I.T. is in general providing free and open course material under the Creative Commons License; see URL: <http://ocw.mit.edu>. (Mr. Pleger probably would have something to say.)

- ⁱ Back in 1959 the dictionary was begun by Pete Samson, as mentioned before, a member of the Train Model Railroad Club and also one of the first M.I.T. computer hackers. URL: <http://tmrc.mit.edu>
- ⁱⁱ Richard M. Stallman's explanation in the documentary-movie Revolution OS.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Richard M. Stallman, "On hacking" (2002); "It is hard to write a simple definition of something as varied as hacking, but I think what these activities have in common is playfulness, cleverness, and exploration." (www.stallman.org)
- ^{iv} The book is a must for every serious investigation of the hacker culture and the so-called hacker ethic. Steven Levy's personal homepage: <http://mosaic.echonyc.com/~steven/>
- ^v "Jargon File", the Jargon File (also known as The Hacker's Dictionary) were begun by Raphael Finkel (a Stanford hacker) in 1975. The original Jargon File did not contain the entry "hacker ethic", in fact nothing explicit about ethics at all - this was still the case in Guy L. Steele Jr.'s (et al) 1983-version.
- ^{vi} The title of the English translation is *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*
- ^{vii} Max Weber's work instantly provoked a debate amongst a wide range of scholars.

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Early version online:

The Original Hacker's Dictionary, <http://www.dourish.com/goodies/jargon.html>

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