Point of View

In this column we invite your opinions on issues affecting the computer and information processing profession. Address your remarks to: P.O.V., COMPUTER Magazine, 8949 Reseda Blvd., Northridge, Ca. 91324.

Dear Sirs:

I hate to let a dialogue, once started, wither on the vine. So I will add a few comments to Harry Larson’s “More on the Oath” in Sept./Oct. Computer.

First, let me agree that thinking about the consequences of applications of one’s work, although a necessary first step, is not enough. If one can reach some decision, action should follow. The distinction between technologists working directly on applications and those working on tools is in the form that the action may take. If an applications person decides that his project is of great social benefit, he can work energetically on it, persuade others to help, try to insure its success, etc. Conversely, he can cease work on projects that he feels to be of social harm. These options may not be open to the toolmaker. He may have to use various forms of persuasion and pressure to affect the ultimate social application and consequences of his work, this being more difficult and less likely to succeed. I did put the onus on the applications people, though I did not mean to let the toolmakers off the hook.

When we consider the substance of an oath, we enter some pretty treacherous ground. Perhaps the wording of the originally proposed oath is too ambiguous, and would tend to make most of us hypocrites. On the other hand an oath which weighs good and bad on some sort of a balance scale, such as Larson’s proposal, will not do. It provides a mechanism with which almost anything could be justified. And it does not tell us who will operate this mechanism, who will be the judges. The American Physical Society is now in the midst of a debate centered on precisely that issue. Their proposed constitutional amendment mentions judging without saying who the judges are. Until IEEE establishes a “Committee on Ethics, Philosophy, and the Weighing of Good and Bad” I strongly feel that the responsibility for judging is the individual’s, the engineer’s, the scientist’s. Otherwise the engineer can shuff off the whole matter by leaving the decision to society consensus, government consensus, fellow worker consensus, or the equivalent. I’m not saying that the engineer should totally ignore these opinions, just that he should not automatically accept them. See the survey in March 1971 Cornell Engineer on engineering ethics. Management consensus was that an engineer should owe his primary ethical responsibility to himself, his own conscience – ahead of his society, his company, or his profession. The phrase “which I believe” in the original proposed oath is a crucial ingredient of any meaningful oath. As to the second part of Larson’s suggestion (after the semicolon) I agree and concur. Suppose we replace the first portion with:

I will use my technical training only for purposes which I believe will enhance the quality of life for all people, . . .

Now what about the engineer without beliefs, who is amoral, in this sense at least. Yes, he can take this oath with impunity. I don’t believe you can force morality, except where criminal behavior is involved. But through education we can attempt to reduce the number of such engineers to an acceptable level. I venture a hypothesis that the most creative and imaginative engineers, the ones capable of the most harm as well as the most good, are the most likely to be sensitive to the impact of their work.

Sincerely yours,

Anthony Robbi
Hopewell, N. J.

NOW—
A Distinctive Emblem For
IEEE Computer Society Members

OFFICIAL

IEEE COMPUTER SOCIETY
JEWELRY

Working with the L.G. Balfour Company, we have produced an elegant reproduction of the IEEE Computer Society logo that can be worn as a lapel pin or tie-tack. A handsome tie-bar, specifically designed for today’s wider ties and a ladies’ charm are also available.

The jewelry is 10-karat gold-filled with the highly polished finish of the Society logo standing out in dramatic relief against the matte gold background. The craftsmanship is excellent. This is a quality piece of jewelry that will last a lifetime of normal wear without losing its good looks. As a Computer Society member, you’ll be proud to own this distinctive emblem.

Use the order blank below to request your jewelry. Orders must be prepaid; price includes postage and handling.

ORDERING INFORMATION

USE THE MULTIPURPOSE ORDER FORM AT THE REAR OF THIS ISSUE TO ORDER YOUR JEWELRY TODAY. For swift and accurate shipment, be sure to include the code number, the full description and price on the form.

(J-1) Lapel Pin/Tie Tac @ $3.25 ea.
(J-2) Tie Bar @ $4.85 ea.
(J-3) Charm @ $3.25 ea.

ORDERS MUST BE PREPAID. THE PRICE INCLUDES POSTAGE AND HANDLING.

MARCH 1973

49