

Preprint from <http://www.philosophyofinformation.net>

This is a preprint of the Preface to

The Philosophy of Computing and Information: 5 Questions (Paperback)

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Preface

When Vincent Hendricks invited me to contribute to, and edit, this volume on the *Philosophy of Computing and Information* (PCI), I was flattered. When I discovered that I had the freedom to invite some of the best researchers in the world to join me in the enterprise, and pick their brains about their experiences, interests and views, I was thrilled. It was only when I finally realised what it meant to coordinate such an effort that I was overwhelmed by its magnitude. After some thoughts and consultations with several colleagues, I came to the conclusion that it would be impossible to produce the sort of volume that I had initially envisaged, something that would recount personal stories, provide insightful ideas on the past, present and future status of PCI, while also giving an overview of who's who in the field and, to top it all, outline the lines of research that are, or could be, fruitful. As a kid in a toyshop, I had a list of invitees that was far too long, given the size of the planned volume, and far too many questions to ask. I also wished to provide some balance, with views coming not just from philosophy, but also from science and industry. The whole project seemed a recipe for failure. If I have even only partly succeeded in my plan, it is because of Vincent's support, the patience and availability of the contributors, and the extraordinary help of Valeria Giardino, my personal assistant, and Joanna Gillies, my research assistant. They really made the volume feasible.

If I were the reader, I would probably skip this brief introduction and jump to the contribution of my preferred researcher. The book is constituted of independent chapters, which indeed could be read in any order. But if the reader can bear with me for another minute or two, I would like to clarify a couple of points that might enhance the reading experience.

With an analogy, PCI could be compared to a pair of pincers. On the one hand, this relatively new field is concerned with the critical investigation of the conceptual nature and basic principles of information, including its dynamics (especially computation), utilisation (especially in ethically sensitive contexts) and sciences. On the other hand, PCI seeks to elaborate and apply information-theoretic and computational methodologies to classic philosophical problems. The reader will find that the following interviews alternate between these two approaches. Their convergence represents a remarkable strength. A second feature of the volume worth emphasising is that PCI owes much to earlier research in the philosophy of Artificial Intelligence (AI). As the perceptive reader may notice, the latter never acquired all the importance that it deserved, but it paved the way for further studies in PCI, which would otherwise have been unlikely to flourish.

Coming to the structure of the volume, all participants were asked the same set of five questions:

1. Why were you initially drawn to computational and/or informational issues?
2. What example(s) from your work (or the work of others) best illustrates the fruitful use of a computational and/or informational approach for foundational researches and/or applications?
3. What is the proper role of computer science and/or information science in relation to other disciplines?
4. What do you consider the most neglected topics and/or contributions in late 20th century studies of computation and/or information?
5. What are the most important open problems concerning computation and/or information and what are the prospects for progress?

The contributors were invited to write a series of specific answers or use the questions as starting points for longer essays. The authors have taken full advantage of this freedom, and this explains the very different lengths and styles of the contributions.

Finally, it is almost pointless to remind the reader that, nowadays, computing and information, and their philosophy in the broad sense, play a most important scientific, technological and conceptual role in our world. Developments in computer and information science, their techniques and methods, have sparked the formulation of, and the solution to, central problems in endless contexts. Their profound influence on our lives is well captured by the view that ours is a global, transnational “information society”. Computational and information-theoretical insights and technologies have sharpened, radicalized and extended how we conceptualise and deal with reality and our lives. Without the computer/information revolution, our century would be unrecognizable. In short, computer science and information science have continued to serve as a fulcrum in the current development of human history. This book attempts to put together the views and experiences of some of the visionary pioneers and most influential thinkers in such a fundamental area of our intellectual development. I hope you will enjoy it and find it inspiring. It was a difficult editorial project to follow, but, on a personal note, it turned out to be worth all the effort.

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Oxford 22 May, 2008