

Introduction to Ethics

Lecture 2-1

Computers & Society (CPSC 430)

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Ethics and Morality

Ethics

Study of morality

Morality

What people ought to or ought not to do

Why do we have a course about ethics and technology?

- Generally need a way to decide the best thing to do
- New problems accompany new technologies
- “Common wisdom” may not exist for novel situations brought about by new technologies

What we're up to here

- **Ethics:** a rational, systematic analysis
- **Workable ethical theory:** produces explanations that aim to be persuasive to a skeptical, yet open-minded audience
- Good, persuasive **arguments.**



Subjective Relativism

“Who are you to criticize my values?”

- There's no universal standard of right or wrong.
- Every individual must decide for himself or herself.

Cultural Relativism

“Who are you to criticize my culture's values?”

- Moral actions are based on a culture's actual moral guidelines.
- Different cultures have different moral standards.
- It is presumptuous to judge another culture's values.

Divine Command Theory

“Stealing is wrong, because the Bible says so.”

- Good actions are actions that God has willed.
- We should therefore use holy books as guides for moral decision making.

Ethical Egoism

“Surly looks out for one guy: Surly!”



- People’s self-interest is their only ethical obligation
- Morally right actions are those which advance one’s own long-term interests
- Helping others is moral only insofar as it advances one’s own interests

Scenario: Intellectual Property

- **A software company made a financial management program**
 - The program stores extremely sensitive financial data about users on users' hard drives
 - The program is very popular, and widely pirated
- **During an automatic software update, the company installs a back door that deletes the data of users who are running a pirated copy**
 - Only pirates have their data wiped
 - No user of a legal copy loses any data
- **Is the company's behavior unethical?**
 - A. Yes: The company behaved unethically
 - B. No: The company did not behave unethically

Scenario Variations

- **Would your answer be different if:**
 - The program was for managing photos instead of finances?
 - The data was stored on the company's servers instead of users' hard drives?
 - The back door existed from the beginning instead of being installed as an update?
 - The back door was disclosed in an End User Licensing Agreement?
 - (that nobody ever reads)

Persuasion Exercise

- Try to persuade the other members of your group:
- Form Groups of 4
 - Identify person A, B, C, D by alphabetical order of first name
- Person A: Argue using subjective relativism
 - Group: Critique Person A's argument
- Person B: Argue using cultural relativism
 - Group: Critique Person B's argument
- Person C: Argue using divine command theory
 - Group: Critique Person C's argument
- Person D: Argue using ethical egoism
 - Group: Critique Person D's argument
- Report back

Discussion

- What was most convincing about the different arguments?
- What was least convincing?
- Was there a critique that applied to all of the theories?