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?