Virtue Ethics

Lecture 2-5

Computers & Society (CPSC 430)

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Movie Download Scenario

- InterMovies is a site that streams TV series and movies for a flat monthly fee

- Collects information about media choices from customers

- Constructs profiles of customers

- Sells profiles to direct marketing firms

- Some customers happy to receive more emails; others unhappy at increase in "junk mail"

Evaluation (Social Contract Theory)

- Consider rights of InterMovies, customers, and other companies

- Does customer have right to expect contact info to be kept confidential?

- If customer watches a show using InterMovies, who owns information about transaction?

What do you think about InterMovies?

Let's explore both scenarios. Working in groups of 3 consider whether each point of view can be justified using social contract theory.

OPTION A: Customer doesn't have the right to privacy

OPTION B: Customer does have the right to privacy

- Try to construct a system of rules that rational people would accept as beneficial, given that others would accept these ideas as well.

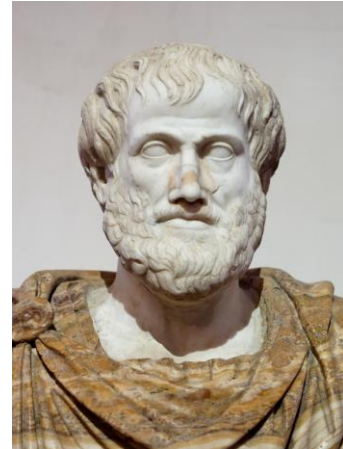- Does this system of rules meet Rawls' conditions?

Social Contract Theory

- What is a social contract?

- What are different kinds of rights?

- What is Rawls' Difference Principle?

- Any questions?

Virtue Ethics

- Aristotle: true happiness and human flourishing lies in living a life of virtue

"The virtues are those character traits human beings need in order to flourish and be truly happy. A virtuous person is a person who possesses and lives out the virtues. A right action is an action that a virtuous person, acting in character, would do in the same circumstances."

- virtues are not just dispositions towards action, but towards feeling
- you develop virtues by habitually repeating the relevant virtuous actions
  - e.g., develop honesty by telling the truth

What are the virtues?

- Different virtues are emphasized in different cultures, but most cultures seem to prize the same things.

- Vices are the opposites of virtues
  - often there are two vices associated with the same virtue
  - e.g., courage lies between cowardice (too much fear) and rashness (too little fear)

Case for Virtue Ethics

- Reasoning from virtue may be more intuitive
  - e.g., stealing is bad because it is dishonest, not because it decreases utility

- We don't have to treat all other people equally
  - we can be partial towards our friends, family

- Recognizes that we mature morally over time

- "There are no irresolvable moral dilemmas"
  - not entirely clear how we're supposed to resolve everything
  - we're told "the right action can always be determined by a person with sufficient moral wisdom"

- Recognizes the importance of emotion

Case Against Virtue Ethics

- Disagreement over the virtues
  - our other workable theories are universal
  - virtue ethics can only be applied given a set of virtues—and reasonable people disagree

- Cannot be used to guide government policy
  - focus on moral actors, not on making good decisions
  - e.g., should we build a highway?

- Undermines attempts to hold people responsible
  - we develop over time, and we're the product of our environments
  - how can we say someone's responsible for acquiring vices instead of virtues?

Exercise

The British government has placed hundreds of thousands of cameras in public places and runs face recognition software that allows the tracking of individuals across cities. The resulting data is used by police to deter and prosecute crimes, and also by the intelligence services for purposes that are not disclosed publicly. The British public is broadly supportive of this initiative, but a substantial minority disagrees.

Is this initiative ethical from the following perspective:

- act utilitiarian

- rule utilitarian

- social contract theory

- virtue ethics

https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/mar/14/public-faces-mass-invasion-of-privacy-as-big-data-and-surveillance-merge

Comparing Workable Ethical Theories

What makes an action morally right?

- It results in the maximum net increase in the total good of the affected parties. (ACT UTILITARIANISM)
- It is in accord with a correct moral rule.
- It is consistent with the actions of a virtuous person. (VIRTUE ETHICS)

What makes a moral rule correct?

- We can imagine everyone following this rule all the time without producing a logical contradiction that undermines the rule. (KANTIANISM)
- The effect of everyone following this rule all the time would be the greatest increase in the total good. (RULE UTILITARIANISM)
- Rational people would collectively accept it as binding because of the resulting benefits to the community. (SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY)