Introduction to Ethics

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1 Administrivia

Announcements

Assignment

Read: Chapter 3.

Turn in answers to these questions: 12, 14.

Use a search engine to find, and turn in, a Web page relevant to: spam, phishing, or spyware.

From Last Time

Introduction.

Coming Up

Networking.

2 Chapter Summary

1. Morality vs. ethics and the purpose of this class.

2. Ethical theories:

   (a) Subjective and cultural relativism.

   (b) Divine command theory.

   (c) Kantianism and the Categorical Imperative:

      i. Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws.

      ii. Act so that you always treat both yourself and other people as ends in themselves and never only as a means to an end.

   (d) Act utilitarianism.

      i. Evaluate each act's effect upon total "happiness."

      ii. BJ Hunnicutt's affair in MASH. Hawkeye talks him out of confessing the affair to his wife.

      iii. "Moral luck." Tediousness of the calculus.

   (e) Rule utilitarianism.

      i. Society should adopt those moral rules which tend to increase total "happiness."

      ii. Same as Kantianism?

      No. Kantianism focuses on will, motive, means. Utilitarianism focuses consequences, end. "The ends do not justify the means."

      iii. General problem: unjust distribution of "happiness."

   (f) Social contract theory.

      i. Under what conditions would individuals abandon the state of nature and enter into a civil society?

      ii. "Morality consists in the set of rules, governing how people are to treat one another, that rational people will agree to accept, for their mutual benefit, on the condition that others follow those rules as well.

iii. The universalization clause of Kantianism does not apply — only that the society accept a rule as binding.

iv. Rights: positive, negative, absolute, limited.

v. Rawlsian justice:

A. Claim to a "fully adequate" set of basic rights and liberties.

B. Any extant social or economic inequalities must: provide fair equality of opportunity; benefit the least well-off in a society.

3 Discussion Questions

1. If you had to choose only one of these ethical systems for your own use, which one would you choose? Why? How would you respond to the arguments against the system?

2. What are some examples of contemporary IT issues for which our society's moral guidelines are unclear or nonexistent?

3. Suppose that a society holds that it is wrong for an individual to eavesdrop on the telephone conversations of another individual. Should that stricture apply also to the society's government?

4 Case Studies

1. John, a college student, frequently participates in YellowMUD. One morning, the college's network administrator, Jane, arrives to find an e-mail from YellowMUD's administrator, Sam, accusing John of severely abusing several other YellowMUD participants and providing recorded scripts of the event as proof. Sam has terminated John's YellowMUD account and also demands that Jane terminate John's college network account. John claims that Sam dislikes him, has been out to get him, and that the script is a fabrication. Jane disables John's network account and refers the case to the college's honor board. As a result, John can't complete required coursework. John approaches Tom and asks him for assistance in the defense. Tom agrees. Jane, not being very familiar with MUDs, their surveillance capabilities, the feasibility of fabrication, nor how to approach Sam for additional evidence, relies upon Tom's advice in collecting information for the case. Has Jane behaved ethically in immediately suspending John's account? Has Tom behaved ethically in helping both sides?

2. It is 1994 and the Web is just beginning to take off. Tom is an assistant computer science professor at a small, rural, conservative, religious-affiliated college. The college doesn't yet have its own Web site. George, one of Tom's students, asks Tom for an independent study project. Tom suggests that George set up a Web server on the department's server and then begin to build a Web site for the college. Tom mentions this idea to the college's IT director and all agree that it's a great idea. A semester later, George has completed the Web site.

   (a) One of the parts of the site is a listing of Web sites which might be of interest to students. Tom notices that this listing includes a link to a site called "Condomania." He decides to ignore it. The college's conservative culture would not support such a link, but Tom reasons that this is something which could be of use to students. A month later, Ralph, another faculty member, comes across this link while browsing the Web site and points out its problematical nature to Tom. Tom removes the link, later informing George of the deletion. George doesn't object. On the two counts of initially allowing the link to persist, and then later removing it himself rather than having George remove it, has Tom acted ethically?

   (b) Another part of the Web site contains smaller sites for the college's sororities and fraternities. $\Delta\Sigma\Omega$'s Web site contains a page of links to the fraternity's alumni's Web sites on various other Web servers. Fred, one of the linked $\Delta\Sigma\Omega$ alumni, has a link to pornography buried within his Web site. The college's development director, Don, himself a $\Delta\Sigma\Omega$ alumnus, discovers the pornography. Several interested parties, including Don, Mike (a $\Delta\Sigma\Omega$ officer), and Tom, meet to discuss the link. Don maintains that pornography shouldn't be included in the college's Web site. Mike argues that Fred's Web site isn't part of the college's site and that this is censorship. Tom observes that from many "safe" Web pages it's possible to reach pornographic content by following just a few links and that most Web users understand that once they leave one Web site via a link to another site, the first Web site is not expected to exert any control of the second site's content. What should be done?

3. Tom's taking an evening course offered by his company covering the internals of its flagship mainframe operating system. To try out what's he's learned, he decides to write a program to retrieve some information deep within the operating system, a process which requires a good deal of delicacy. If improperly accessed, the system might crash. In order to actually run his program, he has to first run a special program to enable his program. Access to the enabling program is usually only provided to senior programmers. Tom runs his program on a heavily used production mainframe, which typically has hundreds of engineers logged in. The program behaves as expected. Has Tom done anything wrong?