Philosophical Perspectives

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1 Administrivia

Announcements

Assignment

Read Chapter 3.

Pick one of the four case studies from this class and two of the three ethical approaches mentioned in class. Starting from the key issues we identified in class, analyze the case study from the perspective of each of the ethical approaches you selected. Work in groups of two or three, utilizing the dialectic process.

From Last Time

Introduction.

Coming Up

Professional ethics.

2 Chapter Summary

1. The dialectic process.

2. Descriptive and normative claims.

3. Philosophical points of view:

   (a) Utilitarianism:

      i. Intrinsic and instrumental value.

      ii. Rules versus acts.

   (b) Deontology:

      i. Moral agency.

      ii. The categorical imperative.

   (c) Virtue ethics:

      i. List of virtues.

      ii. Addresses un-addressed question of moral character.

      iii. Useful for describing ethical professional behavior.

4. Rights:

   (a) Derivable from ethical theories.

   (b) Positive and negative rights.

   (c) Social contract theories.

   (d) Rawlsian justice.

3   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? (From a situation in which I found myself years ago.)

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?

(From two situations in which I found myself years ago.)

3. Tom, an associate professor, tends to have a bias against large corporations and is a long-time user of Unix, which he quite regularly uses rather than using Windows. For several years, he has been following the Microsoft anti-trust case and he ultimately decides that Microsoft will never compete fairly within the marketplace. The facts of the case and Microsoft's subsequent behavior appear to support his conclusion. As a result, Tom pledges to have as little to do with Microsoft products as possible. At the conclusion of each academic year, each member of the college's faculty is required to send an updated copy of their vita and a description of all their accomplishments for the year to the Academic Dean's secretary. The secretary compiles all this information for later presentation to the trustees. Obviously, it is a lot of work. Tom prepares his documents in his usual way, within Unix, converts them to PDF format, and then sends them along to the Dean's office. All other faculty submit documents in MS Word format. Technically, the Dean's secretary can read Tom's documents and include them in the summary reports, but it is trying to cut-and-paste from Acrobat Reader to Word and then re-format the verbiage. Tom is aware of this. The Dean's secretary has not objected to Tom's use of PDF format. Has Tom acted ethically? (My current dilemma.)