

DISCUSSION OF ETHICAL THEORY AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY

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The research in this academic project discusses ethics and ethical theory. The main objective of the project is to analyze the legal and ethical issues in information technology, while gaining an appreciation for ethical theory. There are two parts to the project. In part one, a specific ethical theory is selected and the details of the theory discussed. In part two, a current information technology issue is reviewed, a position clearly stated, and then that position defended using ethical theory. The research project contains the relative concepts and ideas of ethical theory, the supported research, and a personal perspective.

Keywords: ethics, ethical theory, Act Utilitarianism, hacking

Introduction

Ethics is the philosophical analysis of morality and the assessment of people's behavior (Quinn, 2013, p. 53). The study of ethics is important, because it provides an organized approach to understanding the core values of society. There are three core values most people share—life, happiness, and having the opportunity to achieve goals (Quinn, 2013, p. 69). When considering ethics, and how it applies to one's life, there are two ways people see the world: (1) Is a selfish view, where only the integrity of one's own values matter; (2) is where a person acknowledges the importance of other people's core values. Each of these perspectives spawn numerous questions, many of which are based upon culture and social context. This is where the underlying principles of ethics—that focus on morality—can be applied to gain insight into human conduct. It is this human conduct, and how it relates to happiness, that is a central theme to ethical studies. Certainly, ethics are essential to

understanding morality, but ethics itself also spans a broad range of philosophies and practices. Consequently, ethical theory has been created to address the complexities of morality, social norms, and happiness.

Ethical Theory

Ethical theories provide ideas and concepts that examine what is *good* and *bad*—*right* and *wrong*. The principles of ethical theory create a framework for adapting and applying knowledge to the various morals and standards of society. As such, ethical theory addresses specific principles that are deemed essential for a well-functioning society. Of course, what is socially acceptable is always changing. Thus, ethical theory continues to be a work in progress. There are several ethical theories—for example, Egoism, Utilitarianism, Deontology, and Care Ethics, just to name a few (Iowa State University,

2012, slide 12). The research in this project will focus on Utilitarianism, specifically Act Utilitarianism.

Act Utilitarianism

According to LaFollette (2000), Act Utilitarianism is a “principle of utility” that supports the welfare of humans (LaFollette, 2000, p. 165). The primary objective of the theory is to understand how maximizing happiness is connected to good or goodness. The viewpoint of Act Utilitarianism is that people should choose activities, events, and make decisions that make them happy (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d.). In doing so, a person can maximize positive outcomes, and consequently obtain the greatest amount of happiness. This may sound somewhat self-centered; however, Act Utilitarianism means to create communities where the greatest amount of happiness is produced when factoring in the needs of society. For example, if a person has two choices—go to the theater to watch a movie, or help a neighbor clean up their yard—because helping a neighbor clean up their yard will render the greatest amount of happiness for everyone involved, the person should help the neighbor. Although this may sound elementary, Act Utilitarianism is not considered a simple theory. When determining what is *best* for society, variables such as morality, religion, state and federal laws, and character traits all have to be considered (Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, n.d., para. 5). Ultimately, Act Utilitarianism aims to evaluate what influences people’s choices, and then to create a system that produces the greatest utility.

Personal Perspective

After reviewing the initial research on Act Utilitarianism, it is my position that this theory best supports some of my own personal principles. For instance, the theory’s primary goal is seeking happiness for society, which is something I believe

is greatly lacking in the United States. This is not to say that some people are not genuinely happy, because they are. Though, I do believe many Americans are just generally unhappy with their lives, possibly due to only thinking about themselves. In addition to the happiness element of Act Utilitarianism, the theory includes goodness, pleasure, and human welfare. What this means to me, and why I support the theory, is that for society to maximize positive outcomes, a social strategy is required to address the needs of the masses; I believe Act Utilitarianism is that strategy. Act Utilitarianism is a practical theory, based upon morality, which offers a systematic approach to achieving the greatest amount of happiness, and these are the reasons I have selected this theory for further professional research.

Contrast Argument

As attractive as Act Utilitarianism can be, not everyone supports the theory. There are two major criticisms of Act Utilitarianism: (1) Linking utility to personal inclinations is impossible; (2) measuring happiness and suffering is not in any way a definitive process (Utilitarian, n.d.). Considering utility, how does one create a universal standard that will reliably provide the greatest utility from a person’s decisions? It does seem, unless controlled by an outside entity, that a person’s own inclinations, biases, and desires would supersede any kind of universal standard. Additionally, *right* and *wrong* do not always have a clear definition. This fact alone can prevent a person from making the [right] decision that will maximize happiness. Similarly, when trying to quantify happiness, and how it relates to suffering, there is no single method to determine that happiness will always be maximized. As happiness is often based upon *intensity*, *duration*, and *certainty*, adding a social constraint does not always guarantee a good decision. Meaning, the best choice may not always favor society (Quinn, 2013, p. 69). Both of these criticisms present valid issues in the Act Utilitarianism ethical theory. Though, due to the principle of utility usually

favoring society over the individual, creating *universal standards* are not as complex as they may first appear.

Counter Argument

Act Utilitarianism presents its principle of utility as a way of increasing happiness by maximizing positive outcomes. Conversely, there is criticism that questions whether or not happiness can be accurately quantified. If happiness cannot be measured, then the core concepts of Act Utilitarianism are inadequate. Furthermore, cynics point out that even if happiness could be properly calculated, there is no way to guarantee a person would subject themselves to universal standards, ones that work on the behalf of society rather than the individual. It is possible that the skeptics have failed to acknowledge all the components of the principle of utility. The principle consists of a set of checks and balances that address happiness and personal inclinations. For example, actions that benefit a person are considered good; actions that hurt a person are considered bad; and, happiness that has the highest impact on self or community is considered the most advantageous. The argument could still be made that those principles would not compel a person to choose community over self. This is where understanding happiness and maximizing positive outcomes is critical. Eventually, which is the goal of Act Utilitarianism, the person making the decisions would choose to weigh their personal choices with the needs of the community; and thus, a sort of social equilibrium would emerge. It is in this awareness of community and society that makes Act Utilitarianism an attractive ethical theory.

Contemporary Issue

Moving from ethical theory to applied ethics, ethics can be directly applied to a contemporary IT issue. The issue is hacking, that is, hacking with malicious intentions. In 2014 alone, dozens of high profile

hacks caused data breaches, data loss, and tarnished company reputations. Businesses, such as Home Depot and Target, reported millions of dollars in losses due to hackers exploiting weaknesses in their computer and networking systems (Finkle & Bose, 2014, para. 1). But, what exactly is hacking? Hacking is the criminal activity of gaining unauthorized access to a computer system, where the attacker can upload viruses and worms, steal data, and render systems useless (Phys, 2013). From Business Insider (2014), the suggested reason why hackers continue to cost companies millions of dollars, is because businesses just do not feel as though cyber threats apply to them, until it is too late that is (Business Insider, 2014). Hacking damages computer systems, hurts people, and can negatively affect company revenue. Thus, the term hacking has come to have a negative connotation, linking it with illegal activities.

Personal Perspective

From a personal and professional perspective, I have spent my life operating and maintaining networked computer systems. I feel as though those wanting to damage computer systems should receive extremely harsh penalties. One major problem I have with criminal hacking is the effects of malware, viruses, and worms have on a system of networked computers. It is one thing to detect a virus on a single computer at the workplace. It is quite another problem to have thousands (or even tens of thousands) of computers infected with that same virus. Another concern I have with hacking is that it is a violation of privacy. For a business, let us say for the one I work for, student data is arguably the greatest asset we possess. If a hacker gains unauthorized access to our computer systems, that hacker could steal or modify student data, and alter the systems in ways that affect business operations, especially those operations that deal with financial and personal information. To say the least, I do not support this kind of activity and consider it to be criminal and malicious in nature.

Applied Ethics

To support the personal perspective with ethical theory, there are three principles of Act Utilitarianism that may be employed to demonstrate why hacking is *bad*. One of the core principles of Act Utilitarianism states that happiness, and thus goodness, is when *total* happiness is increased for everyone involved (Quinn, 2013, p. 76). Businesses and people who have had their computers and networks compromised are not happy. Therefore, hacking is in direct contravention of the happiness principle. A subsequent principle establishes that an action is considered bad if it hurts someone. Not only does hacking hurt someone, it can literally impact millions of computer systems and people at one time, thus amplifying harm. Hence, hacking is in violation of the second principle. Finally, a third Act Utilitarianism principle dictates that activities, events, and decisions should ultimately maximize *positive* outcomes. As hacking is an illegal activity, [normally] a positive outcome is not possible. Thus hacking, once again, ends up in the bad category (NCSL, 2014).

Conclusion

The study of ethics examines the values of good and bad, and is motivated by a sense of moral obligation. Approaches to understanding ethics are not always simple. Thus, ethical theory has been created, and has been challenged, to provide insight into moral principles. Of course, identifying good and bad, right and wrong, requires in-depth research into human conduct. It is this study of human conduct where happiness, goodness, and moral responsibility can be properly defined. In Act Utilitarianism, increasing happiness and positive outcomes are based upon the rightness or wrongness of a person's actions. Consequently, if a person's decisions are of pure intent—ones that consider the needs of society—the greatest amount of happiness can be achieved. When applying Act Utilitarianism to a real world example, as in hacking, it is evident that ethical theory can be used to delineate the boundaries of good and bad.

Inasmuch, the Act Utilitarianism theory can be seen as a practical system that encourages happiness, while maximizing utility. The final thought is this, could the world become a better place if Act Utilitarianism was applied to mainstream society?

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About the Author



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Notes

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