

A “Code of Ethics” is important to follow because it gives one a set of guidelines of what is unacceptable. When I personally am faced with an ethical dilemma, my own set of personal ethics is applied, but also external pressures are how I come to a decision. For example, I wouldn’t do anything as an engineer that would break the law.

While it is in my interest to listen to my employer and do the work they tell me, a Code of Ethics helps protect me and my employer from legal action. One ethical obligation from the IEEE code of ethics is to “accept responsibility in making decisions consistent with the safety... of the public.” If I were to be instructed to indirectly endanger the public by my employer, like say program an embedded control system to release more toxic waste into a river to decrease costs, I would decline as it is the ethical choice, and that waste could intoxicate the drinking water and endanger the public.

Threat of legal action isn’t the sole reason why one should follow a set of ethics. Following a code of ethics ensures that you make the right decision, despite these outside pressures. One example is how there are trivial unenforced laws, like how technically speeding over the speed limit is illegal, but I can speed 5-10 more mph to stay with the flow of traffic. Officers would only enforce the speed limit when I am recklessly driving or endangering others, so my action would be considered ethical, as I am safeguarding the public.

In class we discussed an ethical dilemma with Big Data where Marcus, a contract computer scientist, is given an injury database which breaks privacy laws. Even though Marcus can look the other way and do the work to fulfill his contract, it is his best interest not to.

Virtue ethics is an approach to ethics where character and honesty is used to make ethical decisions. Under the virtues of honesty and fidelity, Marcus should come out and tell the truth to John, his employer, that their actions are not meeting the “Minimum Necessary” standard. To be “faithful” to the public, and to safeguard their information, he must not accept the project because the data is sensitive information belonging to the medical entity and the paramedics only.

While the virtue of charity argues that this information can help the paramedics, it still doesn’t follow the other set of virtues. If one person is ethical, then it helps others from being unethical, not just by example, but by the actions of goodwill themselves.

Let’s say Marcus chooses the unethical route, and links the data together. What if some malicious actor obtained his data set in a data breach. Included in this dataset is the city’s infection control dataset. Personal information of everyone in the city could be obtained in a breach, like addresses and phone numbers.

Ultimately, while the slippery slope argument does not always hold, it can be said that if Marcus takes the ethical route, there is zero chance of others also taking an unethical route linked to his actions.