Rule Utilitarianism

Chioma Chance

Colorado State University Global

CSC502: Ethical Leadership in Software Development

Dr. Pubali Banerjee

10/27/2024

**Rule Utilitarianism and Ethics in Software Engineering**

Rule utilitarianism is all about following rules that benefit most people. In software engineering, it’s a helpful way to think about ethics—sticking to certain rules means creating tech that’s safer, more reliable, and ultimately better for everyone. In this paper, I’ll explore two examples where rule utilitarianism connects to software engineering ethics and why these rules are vital for creating technology we can trust.

**Data Privacy in Software Engineering**

One major area where rule utilitarianism is relevant is data privacy. There’s an important rule in software engineering: "Always keep user data private." When developers consistently follow this rule, it doesn’t just protect individual privacy—it builds trust. While sharing user data can sometimes have short-term benefits, like improving personalized experiences, it also risks data misuse and breaches, which ultimately harm people and weaken trust in technology.

The GDPR is a great example of this principle in action. By enforcing rules on how user data should be protected, GDPR helps ensure developers are respecting privacy. It’s rule utilitarianism at work—following privacy rules leads to greater good for society, protecting users while still allowing tech to advance responsibly.

**Quality Standards in Open-Source Projects**

Another example is quality standards in open-source software. There’s a rule here that developers should "document code properly and run quality checks before releasing." While it might feel tedious at times, sticking to this rule has huge benefits. Good documentation and quality control make software more reliable and secure for everyone—developers and users alike.

Think about Linux, an open-source system known for its reliability. That reputation didn’t come by chance; it’s the result of the Linux community strictly adhering to rules around code quality and contributions. These rules ensure that software is safe and usable, and that benefits a lot of people over the long term. Again, this is rule utilitarianism in action—consistent rule-following results in maximum utility for all involved.

Rule utilitarianism encourages software engineers to think beyond short-term convenience and instead focus on the long-term good that comes from following consistent ethical practices. Whether it’s about respecting privacy or ensuring quality, these rules help build technology that people can trust. This framework of prioritizing lasting value over immediate gains is key to advancing technology in an ethical way.

**References**

Floridi, L. (2016). *The ethics of information*. Oxford University Press.

Martin, K. E. (2015). Ethical issues in the big data industry. *MIS Quarterly Executive, 14*(2), 67-85.

Spinello, R. A. (2017). *Cyberethics: Morality and law in cyberspace* (6th ed.). Jones & Bartlett Learning.