The Good Hacker

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Is hacking computer systems immoral? To understand the answers to this question, we first have to understand what exactly hacking is from a technical and cultural side. According to the Cambridge Business English Dictionary, the word hacker has a strong negative meaning, "Someone who gets into other people's computer systems without permission in order to find out information or to do something illegal."[1] If this is what hacking strictly means then hacking is undoubtably immoral. In the Bible, Luke 6:31 (ESV) clearly doesn't match up with this, "And as you wish that others would do to you, do so to them." A hacker wouldn't want someone changing information on his computer so it is immoral for him to do so to others. This is the same connotation that our culture feels with the word hacker. On the other hand, according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary's third definition for the word, hacker means, "An expert at programming and solving problems with a computer"[2] This view of the word "hacker" actually has a positive meaning and is in no way immoral.

From my perspective as a Computer Science major, I see the practices/hobbies of hacking or system-cracking as ethical under certain conditions. As long as the hacker is not looking into data that he should not be able to access and is not causing harm to the person/people he is hacking, his actions are ethical. There is a line between ethical hackers and unethical hackers. Ethical hackers will go by the approach of either exploring computer systems for fascination and education, or purposefully trying to find a flaw in another's system to warn them about it. Unethical hackers will either intentionally try to uncover information for themselves that they are not supposed to access, or try to harm another person or entity, usually by changing data or selling it.

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[1] "Hacker." Cambridge Business English Dictionary, Cambridge dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/hacker. Accessed 14 Sep. 2020.
[2] "Hacker." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, merriam-webster.com/dictionary/hacker. Accessed 14 Sep. 2020.

While hacking can be ethical, I can understand why many would say it is immoral. According to writers Paul Walker and Terry Lovat from The Conversation, ethicallity is when the individual believes he is being moral while morality itself is a broader and more objective view usually based on societal norms. Some hackers do tamper with computer systems as a hobby without any intention to cause any harm or see any hidden data. While this is ethical, there is no garentee that what he is doing is moral. If the hacker by accident observes any information that he is not supposed to see or does this without knowing, although he is being ethical, according to Walker and Lovat's analyses, he is being immoral.

If a hacker, ethical or unethical, does come across a vulnerability in a computer system, it is possible for him to turn his actions into a good deed. The hacker should find an appropriate way to notify the person/entity which he found the flaw in. In a CNBC article[3] composed by Arjun Kharpal, this actually took place. When Israeli researcher Yosi Dahan found a flaw in United Airlines' website, he tried to tell them but they ignored him. He eventually escalated this situation to the media to get their attention which was a necessary act.

In the big picture, the practice of hacking can ethical or unethical. While hacking can be ethical, it can also be immoral. From a Christian worldview, if a hacker is being ethical but being immoral, he is also sinning by being foolish and not avoiding lawful controversy. In The Bible, Titus 3:8-9 (ESV) expands on this idea of carelessness of the law, "8 The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people. 9 But avoid foolish controversies, genealogies, dissensions, and quarrels about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless."

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[3] Kharpal, Arjun. "Ethical Hacking: Are Companies Ready?" CNBC, CNBC, 19 June 2015, www.cnbc.com/2015/06/17/are-companies-still-scared-of-white-hat-hackers.html.

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