Lecture summary of week 2 and 3

Week 2: Theoretical underpinning of Ethics

We started the lecture by putting us in an ethical scenario and asking us questions such as making ethical decisions and identifying important moral characteristics.

The lecturer first introduced that there are two types of ethics: descriptive ethics which describes people’s behavior and prescriptive ethics which defines what people ought to do. Prescriptive ethics is characterized by casuistry, normative issues, and normative ethics.

Normative ethics, also called general principle is the core of this lecture consists of two schools of theories: consequential (teleological) and non-consequential (deontological). Immanuel Kant, the foundation of the deontological describes ethics by four attributes: duty, autonomy, consistency, and universalizability. He also suggested two important theories: categorical imperative and maxims. Maxims is a general principle that explains why somebody is doing something. By accepting duty as the basic moral feature, an agent with good will that acts autonomously and consistently to avoid hypocrisy can be regarded as a responsible person. After that, contractarianism is also introduced under deontological theory.

For consequential ethics, Mill and Ross also developed theories about utilitarianism to maximize happiness or “general utility” which emphasize consequences instead of starting point or in other words, maxims.

In the end, virtual is briefly talked about by quoting Plato’s and Aristotle’s theories to explain how an attribute can be defined as a virtue. Virtue is a private morality (individual morality) that questions the virtue a person should exhibit. It defines right or wrong in terms of virtuous behavior as a function of one’s character. To cultivate a virtue, we must avoid too much or too little on a personal trait.

Thus, it can be concluded that ethics is a complicated issue not only because values are different in different cultures and scenarios, but also there is no one single moral theory or principle that should be accepted as preferable to others, and there is not necessary any principles that everyone should accept.

Week 3: Moral reasoning and Professional Ethics

This lecture is about making ethical decisions and making ethical judgments. First, the lecturer introduced barriers to ethical decision-making that may conflict with Objectivity, customer Interest other appropriate ethical considerations which are Partisanship, Rationalization, Bias, Ethical blindness, equivalency, and Ethical Scripts. And an example of Ford Pinto was given to explain the ethical scripts. In the real-life, it is common to encounter barriers that may lead to unethical decisions, especially when our personal interest is involved, so managing and avoiding conflicts is important.

Then, few ethical dilemmas are given and we talked about how to deal with a counterexample. After that, the process and principle of making moral judgment are illustrated and the lecturer stressed that, in a matter of judgment, the situation is not black and white. To make a better ethical decision, we need to depict a picture of the whole story to balance the interest and consequence.

However, besides ethical judgment that represents responsibility, rules and regulations that stand for accountability are also important. Comparing to responsibility, accountability is more directive, and it emphasizes the process. While responsibility corresponds to a code of ethics, there is also a code of conduct that requires accountability. Because of the features of accountability, a code of conduct is necessary to guarantee uniformity and to keep the public trust.

After that, ethical awareness to avoid moral negligence, moral recklessness, moral blindness, and moral competence is illustrated followed by ethical caution. Comparing to ethical awareness which is a passive principle, it requires people to prevent, avoid and minimize unethical which is a really tough job. The principles involved are precautionary principle, safe exit, and defensive driving.

In the end, the lecturer discussed bout the hierarchy and dirty hand theory by an example of the trolley problem and few relevant cases. Although it is tough to make decisions because of collateral damage, we must make reasonable decisions according to the general principle. To deal with the double effect, we must start from a good will (intention) and consider the foreseeable consequences.