Ethical Theories + Jefferson and Barlow Comparison

Ethical Theories + Jefferson and Barlow Comparison

Nathan Ketterlinus

February 18, 2024

Towson University, COSC418-102, Steven Evans

Abstract

This paper is broken into two parts: the first contextualizes deontology through the modern lens of nuclear power. It specifically discusses the politics of personal autonomy, who bears the risks associated with operating massive power plants, and the issues associated with gathering informed consent from populations willing to allow the construction of a power plant in their area. The second part of this paper juxtaposes Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence with John Perry Barlow’s *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. Specifically, it compares them across the metrics of target audience, specificity, and addressed individual rights. This is then followed by a sample cyber declaration inspired by both documents, outlining ethical behavior in cyberspace.

Ethical Theories + Jefferson and Barlow Comparison

Section 1: Deontology and the Ethics of Nuclear Power

Deontology is the ethical framework that morally justifiable actions are those that coincide with a person’s duties. That is, people are obliged to do certain things, regardless of the positive or negative consequences produced, according to the rules that they live by. This is what separates deontology from utilitarianism, which only focuses on the social utility (that is, the amount of good vs bad produced across all affected parties) of an action. Deontology utilizes two different classes to separate reasons to do something: hypothetical imperatives and categorical imperatives. While hypothetical imperatives are used as a means to an end, such as exercising to be healthy (“do Y to get X.”), categorical imperatives are actions which should be carried out for their own intrinsic value (“do X!”) (Chadwick, 2001, p. 80). Categorical imperatives are those that are universalizable to all cases, treat all people as an end (not just a means to an end), and respect the autonomy of all rational beings (Chadwick, 2001, p. 81).

Nuclear power is obviously very dangerous. Consider the radioactive fallout surrounding Chernobyl even 38 years after such a tragic accident. In addition, the history of nuclear power is rooted in military secrecy and weaponization, so public approval of such a supply has been low since its inception. However, nuclear fission does not emit any greenhouse gases, which is becoming a rising concern as the volume of fossil fuels needed to keep up with modern demands only continues to grow.

Modernizing deontology in the context of nuclear power, many important ethical issues arise. For example, where is it deontologically appropriate to build a nuclear reactor? In utilitarianism, the answer is straightforward: wherever the most power can be generated while harming the least amount of people.

Deontologically, however, it is much harder to justify the positives a reactor may provide to a community, when the possibility of another meltdown on the scale of the Chernobyl disaster threatens to ruin the lives of everyone in an enormous radius of the plant. In this sense, the deontological perspective is one that is inherently against the idea of nuclear power in favor of respecting people’s autonomy.

Now, consider a fully operational power plant on an average workday. Who bears the risk associated with a meltdown? Obviously, there are the on-site employees and civilians in the vicinity. In addition, by the latent nature of radiation poisoning, future generations are also at risk. Clearly it is unethical to subject people who have not been born yet to such destructive consequences, especially not for the gain of the present generation higher-ups vacationing thousands of miles away from the power plants they greenlit.

Finally, there’s the issue of informed consent. Chadwick asserts that “the only communities willing to serve as compensated hosts for proposed high-level nuclear waste facilities are Yakima Indian Nation, Nye County (Nevada), and Morgan County, (Tennessee), all areas with high unemployment, high poverty, and low levels of education” (2001, p. 320). When the only places willing to allow the construction of a nuclear power plant are populations that likely do not fully understand the risks in such a project, the validity of their consent comes into question. Deontologically speaking, do we have the duty to recognize these population’s consent? Or do we ignore them, like how we do not recognize the consent of children for their own good?

To summarize, this section has looked at how the deontological framework intersects with the modern issue of nuclear power. Specifically, we analyzed how deontologists are inherently against nuclear power for the risks it poses to personal autonomy.

Then, we discussed the inequity of who bears the risk of a nuclear meltdown, and finally we discussed the difficulty in obtaining informed consent from populations to allow for the construction of nuclear power plants.

Section 2: Barlow vs Jefferson Comparison

Thomas Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence is considered by many to be a catalyst document. It profoundly altered the course of events in the world, and inspired many others to draft similar documents, such as John Perry Barlow’s *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace*. This essay will compare the two, finding similarities and differences between each. It will then venture to draft its own cyber declaration for 2024 and beyond.

To begin, the Declaration of Independence was written by the very small, centralized population that lived in the 13 colonies, addressed to the king of England. As such, the diction Jefferson uses is very poignant and precise in order to appear reasonable and intelligence, as well as to write with the respect a king deserves (regardless of the fact that this document completely cuts all ties with the English government). On the other hand, the *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* is written by one guy in Switzerland (on behalf of the entire internet) to no one in particular. As a result, the word choice is much more casual and arrogant. Barlow even asserts that “We [internet users] are forming our own Social Contract. This governance will arise according to the conditions of our world, not yours. Our world is different” (para. 5). This difference in tone drastically changes the ethical claims each document makes. While Jefferson claims “all men are created equal”, and that “Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” are inalienable rights, Barlow accuses governments of neither soliciting nor receiving the consent of the governed in cyberspace and calling their powers unjust.

Secondly, the Declaration of Independence cites specific examples of why the colonies felt the need to write this document, complete with a list of grievances towards the king of England. On the contrary, the *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* is a much more general document, condemning all government and their tendency to intrude on the private citizen’s affairs. An interesting observation can be made is that since the Declaration of Independence is so concerned with respecting the autonomy of all people and presenting universalizable rights, it takes a very deontological approach. Similarly, the *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,* while not as explicitly deontological, still falls under that umbrella because of all the universalizable principles it sets forth.

Thirdly, the Declaration of Independence is much more concerned with protecting a population’s right to organize their own government, whereas the *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* is more focused on the individual’s right to privacy and the free proliferation of information. Again, the difference between these documents can be explained by its scope: Jefferson set out to protect all the people in a new nation, while Barlow wanted to protect the individual (inductively protecting all people). This difference provides very different perspectives into how ethical frameworks are utilized by groups of differing sizes.

Table 1: Summary

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Target Audience | Specific | Rights addressed |
| Declaration of Independence | The king of England | Yes | Life, Liberty, Pursuit of Happiness, gov’t organization |
| *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* | All governments everywhere | No | Privacy, Information |

My Cyber Declaration of 2024

Using Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence and Barlow’s *Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace* as a framework, this section of the paper hopes to present a new cyber declaration for the modern age. While this document does not specifically rebel against a tyrannist government (or governments), it does outline certain behaviors that cyber citizens have a moral responsibility to uphold. Specifically, cyber citizens should strive to:

1. Behave in a manner that upholds the dignity of all people whenever possible. This can be achieved through Kant’s principles behind the categorical imperative:
   1. Do actions you will to be universalizable.
   2. Treat all people as an end (not just a means to an end).
   3. Respect the autonomy of all rational beings (Chadwick, 2001, p. 81).
2. Use new and emerging technologies responsibly. For example, the current emergence of AI generative technologies like ChatGPT and Dall-E should not be used for nefarious purposes such as deep faking public officials.
3. Respect the rights and wishes of creators regarding their creations. This includes following copyright and creative commons restrictions, paying for and obtaining products through official channels, and respecting the time and energy it takes to produce any digital creation.
4. Contribute to public discussions when reasonably able. The biggest strength of the internet is its ability to give anyone a platform. We should be leveraging this trait to produce a knowledge base as wide as it is deep. The individual should contribute knowledge in their areas of expertise in the hopes of educating anyone wishing to learn.

References

Barlow, J. P. (2018, April 8). *A declaration of the independence of Cyberspace*. Electronic Frontier Foundation. https://www.eff.org/cyberspace-independence

Chadwick, R. F. (2001). *The Concise Encyclopedia of the Ethics of New Technologies*. Academic Press.

National Archives and Records Administration. (2023, October 11). *Declaration of independence: A transcription*. National Archives and Records Administration. https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript

A screenshot of a computer

Description automatically generated