

Prompt

It has been said that we are adopting new technologies and technology driver business models at a rapid pace, and that there is an urgent need to identify and address the ethical issues arising out of such trends.

Outline two broad ethical approaches and evaluate each of them.

Response

With the rapid development of new technologies and tech-based business models, there are major ethical questions that need to be addressed. Beyond this, the question must be asked: what does it mean to be ethical in the digital world?

The primary issue is that the concept of right and wrong is a difficult concept itself. There is massive variance within an individual idea of right and wrong. The extrapolation of this into a societal wide set of rules means that some people are going to disagree with the rules. This is a large part of whole idea of politics. There is also the issue that no set of rules will fully encapsulate every action. Thus, we must try to use a set of principles that can adequately encompass as many scenarios as possible.

There are two clear philosophical approaches that one should consider when trying to answer these questions: deontological ethics and utilitarianism or consequentialism.

Deontology is the idea that morality is defined by the attempt to adhere to right and wrong. Therefore, it is defined by intent. Thus, if a person means well, their actions are just, regardless of the outcome. In essence, deontology is much more concerned with the process and how the process is undertaken. Consequently, deontology has much more regard for autonomy than consequentialism would, even if the outcomes of those actions are a societal negative [1].

Consequentialism on the other hand is much more concerned with the outcome. This says that if an action has an ultimately positive outcome, the action is a moral one, regardless of the actions undertaken to get there. This has no regard for the process, and as a result, consequentialism can sometimes be seen as treating people as quantifiable, therefore removing their autonomy. However, it also generally results in the most good being done [2]. There are benefits and drawbacks to both systems.

These principles can be represented by the trolley dilemma. The dilemma creates a scenario where you are looking at a train approaching five people tied to the tracks, with no time to stop. You are stood beside a big switch diverts the train to another line, but this rail line has one person on it. The question is this: should you switch the lines [3].

The question surmises that the consequentialist approach is one dead person is better than five dead people. However, the deontological approach states that you taking an active approach to killing an innocent person, regardless of whether it saves lives or not, is immoral. This exact problem can be direct translated to self-driving cars, as there must be a hierarchy of options the car can take when making this decision.

However, as one can expect, complete rigidity to either of these principles could and would result in immoral behaviour. From the Trolley problem, we can see that five lives are more valuable than one live via consequentialism. This creates a value system of human life. This then becomes more difficult when people with different circumstances are considered – are healthy people more valuable than unhealthy people? are children more valuable than the elderly? are people

who have behaved well more valuable than people who have behaved poorly? Returning to the self-driving car dilemma, if a car is forced to choose between two people on who to die, who should it be?

This can then be extrapolated further to some other issues that arise as a result of the widespread use of tech – specifically in the realm of Socio-Technological Systems. For example, consider the question of free speech and censorship. The problem with free speech is that some speech will result in some people being offended. Via the principles of consequentialism, someone engaging in speech that others may find offensive online would mean that the person making offensive comments will be censored from posting. Whereas with deontology, the person will not be censored as their autonomy and their right to free speech is more important than the consequences of what they are saying.

Taking this problem a step further, again via the respect for autonomy, deontology will say that anonymity should be respected. However, as we have seen, anonymity has led to some serious issues in the online space regarding cyberbullying and harassment. A consequentialist approach would say that anonymity that results in a lesser enjoyable place for the people who use it is immoral.

Furthermore, technological systems are now global. And with being global, they must account for the various compromises that have been made by different countries on the question of free speech. One such company with a major issue was Facebook. During their early days, Facebook had a motto of “move fast and break things” [4]. This was predicated on deontological ideology. Facebook meant well, and if there were any issues, they would go back and fix them. Facebook also had its own policy on hate speech, a derivation of acceptable censorship. These collective failings resulted in genocide against the Rohingya Muslims in 2014 [5]. This policy has now been replaced with a more carefully considered approach, looking at the risks and a lot of thinking into the potential issues that come with Socio-Technological Systems.

Another failing that occurred that led to the genocide in Myanmar was the use of algorithms. As has been well documented online, the use of algorithms has resulted in political echo chambers whereby people are only shown content that they agree with, which amplified the hate against the Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar [6]. Algorithms themselves cause a whole set of ethical issues on their own.

Many algorithms use machine learning to develop themselves. This can create massive biases from both a human and a technological level. There have been many instances whereby AI generated technology has discriminated against minorities or people of marginalised groups. One such example occurred where an Amazon recruiter that using AI to help it determine the candidates found that the AI was discriminating against women, including downgrading the value of all women’s colleges [7]. There are also other such examples of AI discriminating on the basis of race.

Finally, we should look at how this impacts data privacy. A deontological approach would say that the rights afforded to data subjects is of paramount importance, and that every measure to ensure that data is protected should be undertaken. However, can those laws be broken for law enforcement purposes? Consequentialism would say yes. Deontology would say no. What if the processing of everyone’s data in Ireland would mean that Ireland could be kept completely safe. Consequentialism would say yes. Deontology would say no.

As we can see, taking a predominantly consequentialist or a predominantly deontological approach can result in unethical behaviours. Therefore, there must be a balancing act between the two of them. Ultimately, a hierarchy must be made for when to choose either ideology, and an evaluation must be undertaken to decide when is appropriate to use one or the other.

This question is one that must be carefully considered going forward in society, as technological advancements are increasing exponentially in speed. It is important that we ensure companies act ethically, in a world where fewer companies can do more with less, via the use of data and tech.

References

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