Week01 Essay #1: Ethics (Baase 1.4)

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Week01 Essay for Baase 1.4 Ethics (the word count: 923)

In Chapter 1, Section 1.4 of the book *A Gift of Fire: Social, Legal, and Ethical Issues for Computing Technology*, authors Sara Baase and Timothy M. Henry introduce ethics and how they apply to computing technology [1]. The section has three subsections; one defines ethics, one discusses ethical views, and one covers important distinctions to consider when making ethical judgements [1].

Baase and Henry begin Section 1.4.1 by highlighting that despite technology appearing to develop on its own, people have full control over how it is built, used, governed, and standardized [1]. When people decide what to do with their technology, or make any decision in general, they must also determine whether their actions are correct and should be taken [1]. In that way, they are practicing ethics, which the authors define as "the study of what it means to 'do the right thing'" [1]. For example, would a person be correct to download movies from unauthorized websites, or to use robotic equipment instead of human workers at his or her factory [1]? The authors then claim that unless people's decisions are made while their lives or livelihoods are in danger, they can be rational and responsible for their decisions, which shape ethical theory [1]. The authors define ethical rules as rules that should be followed to ensure good results for all people in all situations; the rules can be natural or made up over time [1]. The authors end Section 1.4.1 by stating that behaving ethically is usually easy, especially when not doing so could mean lost friends or jailtime, but courage is necessary if the ethical behavior requires major sacrifice or itself could result in negative consequences [1].

In Section 1.4.2, Baase and Henry introduce several specific theories with their own methods of determining which actions and rules are ethical and why [1]. First, deontological theories emphasize the absolute adherence to ethical rules for every action, no matter the consequences [1]. For example, one should not lie even if it means helping a murderer find his or her intended victim [1]. Second, utilitarianism is the theory that an action (under act utilitarianism) or a rule (under rule utilitarianism) is ethical if it increases the total happiness (utility) among all stakeholders, and unethical if it decreases the total happiness [1]. This means that utilitarianism is primarily about the consequences of each action or rule, but it is problematic in that there is no easy formula for calculating change in utility for all the right people [1]. Also, act utilitarianism allows full freedom to break ethical rules at the expense of individual rights if total utility will still increase [1]. Third, natural rights, such as those to life, liberty, and property, mean people should be allowed to make their own decisions without coercion from others, and that they should have exclusive rights to their own property and labor [1]. Fourth, negative rights

(liberties) and positive rights (claim rights) differ in that a person may not be prevented from acting on a liberty (such as life, in which case no one may kill that person), while others must provide the person's claim rights (such as life, in which case some people must pay for the food and medical care for those who could not afford them themselves) [1]. Fifth, golden rules (taught by the Bible and Confucius) require that people be respectful of others in every choice they make, so they would be likelier to be respected by the others [1]. Sixth, living a virtuous life (per Aristotle) means honestly working or acting to charitably contribute to society [1]. Finally, social contract theory is when people must sacrifice their individual interests for a fairer and more civil society under a basic set of laws and rights that a government will enforce [1]. The authors explain how John Rawls interpreted the theory to mean that all people under a political system must agree on laws to be universally followed, should be tolerant of one another, and should have the claim rights necessary to make the best use of their freedoms; the political system must also generally not make the least-advantaged people worse off [1]. Because the different theories have their own imperfect definitions for what is and is not ethical, and those definitions will often conflict, there is no universal method one can reliably use for every ethical problem [1].

In Section 1.4.3, Baase and Henry identify several distinctions that best aid people in their ethical judgements [1]. First, not every action should be considered either obligatory or prohibited, as there are some actions that one may do but is not required to do [1]. Second, harm for any one person should not automatically leave an action unethical (such as if one declined to provide a gift to someone else), but some actions that could endanger others are usually considered wrong even if no harm is committed every time [1]. Third, an unethical method of achieving a goal does not make the goal itself unethical because there could be ethically acceptable methods for achieving the same goal [1]. Fourth, one's feelings about what is right and what is wrong do not always match with the reasonable treatment of right or wrong [1]. Finally, laws are different from ethics in that they can either be passed to enforce ethical rules, set standards for how actions should be completed (for example, driving on the right side of the road in the United States to not endanger other drivers), or favor certain groups of people against ethical rules [1]. As a result, not everyone agrees unethical laws should be followed, and it takes time and thoughtful consideration to craft a law that ethically covers new technology [1].

REFERENCES

[1] Sara Baase and Timothy M. Henry. 2018. A Gift of Fire: Social, Legal, and Ethical Issues for Computing Technology (5th. ed.). Pearson Education, Inc., Hoboken, NJ.