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Introduction

This list of case studies was prepared with the assistance of OpenAI's ChatGPT. Adequate prompts were provided to aim to get studies that operate like genuine moral dilemmas rather than problems with obvious solutions - reasonable people will not immediately know what to do, and may possibly get it wrong, and/or find it difficult to justify their choice. The obtained case studies were manually edited to produce interesting dilemmas and better suit the goals of the course.

In your answers, make sure that you don't just use your raw intuition to deal with the moral issues. Show your knowledge of the theories and concepts taught in the course by engaging explicitly with them and showing that you can apply them to an actual case to solve the problem.

Note: this list may be slightly edited during the term, and new cases may be added. **You are not required to read these case studies before each tutorial/lab**, but you may wish to do so. Your lab instructor will tell you about their requirements and they may differ from these instructions. They may give you slightly different case studies and/or additional ones. If you came up with an interesting case study that constitutes a genuine moral dilemma, don't hesitate to email it to the instructor/lab instructor, who may add to this list (this term or for the following terms).

Vasco

Lecture 1 – Introduction to Ethics

Embellishing a CV for a Dream Job

Context: Alex, a recent computer science graduate, is applying for a competitive AI research position at a prestigious tech company. He has strong technical skills, but his work experience is minimal, limited to a few short internships and freelance projects. The company's job description explicitly states the need for two years of professional experience in machine learning, which Alex does not fully meet. Desperate to land the job, Alex considers inflating his resume by exaggerating his role in a previous project, claiming he led a machine learning initiative when, in reality, he was just a supporting team member.

Ethical Dilemma: Alex knows the company may not verify every detail, and his technical skills could allow him to excel in the role if given a chance. The job would change his career trajectory and offer financial stability, something he badly needs. However, he also knows that exaggerating his experience is dishonest and could harm his reputation if discovered. Torn between honesty and the fear of missing out on a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, Alex faces a tough decision.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Is it ever justifiable to exaggerate qualifications if you believe you can perform the job well? Don't just say what you think is expected of you. Produce an argument for what you believe is right, and explain why.
2. What are the potential consequences for Alex if his dishonesty is discovered after he is hired?
3. How should Alex weigh his personal needs against the ethical implications of lying on his CV? How much do you think personal needs should be weighed in an ethical decision?
4. Are there alternative ways Alex could demonstrate his skills and potential without resorting to dishonesty?

Using ChatGPT instead of having to learn ethics

Context: Jordan is a university student who has been overwhelmed with multiple commitments, including part-time work and extracurricular activities. Faced with a tight deadline for an important assignment in his ethics course, Jordan decides to use ChatGPT

to generate the bulk of his paper. Although Jordan is permitted to use AI tools for assistance, he chooses not to disclose this fact in his submission. He assumes that completing the assignment quickly will allow him to manage his busy schedule more effectively. He knows that he will have to know the material later (for his final exam), but he thinks that's a problem he can deal with later, when he's less stressed.

Ethical Dilemma: Jordan's use of ChatGPT to write his assignment, while technically allowed, results in practical and ethical issues. By not disclosing his use of the tool, Jordan misses out on a valuable learning opportunity. His professor, an expert in her field, could have provided personalized feedback and insights that would have enhanced Jordan's understanding of the course material. Additionally, Jordan's choice to bypass direct engagement with the learning process could be seen as disloyal to classmates who use ChatGPT appropriately by citing it and integrating it into their own work, demonstrating genuine effort and academic integrity. Was Jordan right in acting as he did?

Questions for Discussion:

1. How does Jordan's choice to use ChatGPT without disclosure affect his educational experience? What are the potential learning opportunities he might miss out on by not engaging more deeply with the course material?
2. What are the ethical implications of not disclosing the use of AI tools in academic assignments, even if it is allowed by the instructor?
3. How might Jordan's decision be perceived by classmates who use ChatGPT properly, including acknowledging its use in their work? What implications does this have for academic integrity and fairness?
4. What if Jordan says he's "clever" by getting ahead of other classmates with less effort? Is he right?

Lecture 2 – Conventional morality and conflicts of interest

Torn between competing loyalties

Context: Sarah is a data scientist at a successful tech firm that develops AI tools for financial services. Over the past year, Sarah has been closely involved in a cutting-edge project using AI to predict market trends—a project that is still confidential. One day, her best friend, Lisa, who runs a start-up in a similar field, approaches Sarah for advice. Lisa's company is struggling, and she desperately needs insights to help her business survive. Sarah knows she has valuable information that could help Lisa, and she wants to support

her friend, who has always been there for her. However, sharing this information, even casually, could unintentionally give Lisa's start-up a competitive edge against her own employer.

Ethical Dilemma: Sarah's contract doesn't explicitly prohibit casual sharing of insights with friends, and there's no clear legal breach involved unless Lisa uses the information directly against Sarah's employer. However, Sarah feels a deep sense of loyalty to her company and knows that even the smallest leak of insider knowledge could harm their market position. At the same time, the personal bond with Lisa and her friend's genuine struggle make Sarah feel morally compelled to help. She faces a difficult choice: remain loyal to her company and withhold valuable advice, or help her friend in a way that might indirectly betray her employer's trust.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Should Sarah prioritize her loyalty to her friend over her moral duty to her employer, especially when no explicit legal boundaries are being crossed?
2. How should Sarah weigh her personal relationships against the potential impact of sharing sensitive information?
3. Are there alternative ways Sarah could support her friend without compromising her moral obligations to her employer?
4. What are the broader implications of Sarah's decision for professional trust and personal integrity?

Torn between loyalty to the company and self-interest (loyalty to oneself)

Context: John is a software engineer at a mid-sized tech company that specializes in developing AI-driven healthcare solutions. Recently, John has been working on a personal side project in his spare time—an AI tool that helps patients manage chronic conditions more effectively. The side project started as a hobby, but it's gaining traction, and John sees the potential for it to become a profitable business. However, John's employment contract includes a clause that states employees must not engage in any work that competes with the company's interests, and his side project is somewhat related to his employer's main product line.

Ethical Dilemma: John believes his project doesn't directly compete with his employer because it targets a different market segment. However, as the project grows, the line between his job and his side work blurs, and he starts to use some of his company's

resources, such as software licenses and occasional work hours, to advance his project. John feels torn because he's passionate about his side project and sees it as an opportunity to make a meaningful impact, but he also suspects that he may be violating his duty of loyalty and potentially harming his employer's interests.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Is John justified in pursuing his side project, given its potential benefits to society and his personal career growth?
2. Should John disclose his project to his employer, even though it might lead to conflict or force him to give it up?
3. How should John balance his passion for innovation with his contractual and ethical obligations to his employer?
4. What are the potential consequences for John and his employer if the conflict of interest is discovered?

The perils of blind loyalty

Context: Emma is a project manager at a tech company specializing in AI-driven marketing solutions. Her boss, Michael, has been her mentor for years, guiding her career and advocating for her promotions. Thanks to Michael's support, Emma has advanced rapidly within the company, and she feels a deep sense of gratitude and loyalty toward him. Recently, Michael has been under pressure to deliver results, and he has started cutting corners, pushing the team to exaggerate the performance metrics of their latest AI tool in presentations to potential investors.

Ethical Dilemma: One day, Michael asks Emma to help prepare data that inflates the tool's capabilities, making it seem more accurate and effective than it truly is. Michael frames it as a temporary measure to secure funding, assuring Emma that they'll correct the data once the company's situation stabilizes. Emma is uncomfortable with this and the action could lead to serious consequences if discovered, but she also feels immense pressure to support Michael, who has always been there for her. She worries that refusing might damage their relationship and stall her career. Torn between her loyalty to her mentor and her commitment to honesty, Emma faces a challenging decision.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Should Emma prioritize her loyalty to Michael, considering all he has done for her, or uphold her other ethical standards?

2. How should Emma handle the conflict between her personal gratitude and professional integrity?
3. What are the potential consequences for Emma, Michael, and the company if she complies with his request?
4. Are there ways Emma can address the situation without compromising her values or damaging her relationship with her boss?

Lecture 3 Rejecting ethical relativism - Cybercrime

Hactivism

Context: K is a skilled cybersecurity expert from a country where hacktivism is viewed as an acceptable form of activism against perceived injustices. In his home culture, hacking into systems to protest against corrupt or oppressive entities is seen as a heroic act rather than a wrongdoing. Now working for a Canadian tech company, K reconnects with old friends who are planning an aggressive cyberattack against a large corporation they consider guilty of environmental harm.

Ethical Dilemma: K's friends believe that the hack will reveal the corporation's environmental violations and bring about positive change. They view this action as a moral obligation, in line with their shared cultural values. K feels a strong connection to his friends and their cause, but he is aware that participating in the hack would violate the ethical standards of his current workplace and that hacking is considered unethical in Canada. He faces a conflict between his loyalty to his cultural background and his adherence to the ethical norms of his current environment.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Should K support his friends' actions based on his cultural values, even if they conflict with the ethical standards of his workplace?
2. How can you determine whether hacking is moral in this case? Keep in mind that if you think that hacking could be moral in some particular cases but not in others, this doesn't show that you are a moral/cultural relativist, since objectivists can be sensitive to context (e.g. how much damage to the environment is being done?) and still deny that it's culture that defines what is right (an example of this moral relativism would be: K is from country X, and in X hacking is fine, so hacking must be ethical for K).

3. What are the broader implications of accepting or normalizing such actions under the guise of cultural relativism?

Using ransomware as a form of moving up in life

Context: Maya is a data analyst for a global tech company. She grew up in a poor country where getting rich is almost impossible through one's own merits. Wealth is acquired through inheritance or theft. In this country, holding data for ransom is viewed as a clever strategic maneuver. These acts are seen as justified - as simply a way to leverage one's knowledge to move up in life. Maya discovers that a group of her friends from her home country is involved in a scheme to hold sensitive company data for ransom. Their goal is to extract a large sum of money, which they plan to distribute among themselves and use for personal enrichment.

Ethical Dilemma: Maya is conflicted between her cultural upbringing, where such practices are seen as acceptable and a form of economic empowerment, and the ethical standards of her current environment, which view holding data for ransom as a serious breach of trust and integrity. Maya must decide whether to support her friends' scheme, which aligns with her cultural values but contradicts the ethical norms of her workplace, or to reject the practice and uphold principles of data integrity and professional conduct.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Should Maya support her friends' ransom scheme based on her cultural perspective, even though it conflicts with the ethical standards of her workplace and current norms?
2. How can she reconcile her cultural values with the ethical expectations of her current environment? Should she change values every time she moves?
3. Should we judge Maya, although she is from another culture? Why or why not?

An example not related to cybercrime – Culturally-accepted bribery

Context: Daniel is an AI consultant working for a global tech firm that is expanding into new international markets. He is sent to negotiate a major contract in a country where it is customary for businesspeople to give "gifts" to government officials to secure deals—a practice that, in this context, is considered normal and not legally punishable. Daniel's company, however, has a strict anti-bribery policy and operates in countries where such actions would be considered corruption. Local colleagues assure Daniel

that this is just “how things are done” and that without a gift (and note that government officials expect expensive gifts), his company will almost certainly lose the contract.

Ethical Dilemma: Daniel is torn. On one hand, he understands that refusing to participate in what is locally seen as an acceptable and expected practice could damage his company’s prospects and undermine months of work. On the other hand, participating would directly violate his company’s ethical guidelines. Daniel is faced with the challenge of navigating conflicting moral norms: the local cultural acceptance of gift-giving as a harmless gesture and his company’s view of it as unethical bribery.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Is bribery wrong in your view, or does it depend on whether the culture is OK with it?
2. Should Daniel conform to local practices if they conflict with his company’s ethical standards?
3. Does moral relativism solve or complicate ethical decision-making in international business?
4. What are the risks of Daniel adopting a “when in Rome” mentality in this situation?
5. How can Daniel respect cultural differences without compromising ethical principles that may be objective rather than relative to a country?

Lecture 4 – Utilitarianism I – hacking

Robin Hood hacking

Context: Anna is a cybersecurity expert working for a tech firm that develops software to protect financial institutions from cyberattacks. During her work, Anna uncovers a severe vulnerability in the software of a small regional bank. This vulnerability could easily be exploited to drain the accounts of its wealthiest clients, who are known for using their wealth to influence politics in ways that perpetuate inequality and harm vulnerable communities. Anna knows that if these wealthy individuals lost a significant amount of money, it could weaken their influence and lead to a broader distribution of resources that could benefit many people in her community.

Ethical Dilemma: Driven by the idea of maximizing overall well-being, Anna considers hacking into the bank herself to exploit this vulnerability, knowing she could redirect the funds to charities, community projects, and struggling families. She reasons that the positive impact on many lives would outweigh the harm done to a few wealthy individuals,

who would still have enough to live comfortably. From a utilitarian perspective, her actions could result in the greatest good for the greatest number, as the stolen money would significantly improve the lives of those in need.

However, Anna's actions would involve theft, deception, and violation of professional and legal standards. She would be betraying the trust placed in her as a cybersecurity professional and could cause severe financial and emotional distress to the affected individuals. There's also the risk that her actions could destabilize the bank, harming innocent employees and smaller account holders who are unaware of the bank's clientele. Moreover, even though the direct harm seems minor compared to the benefits, Anna's conduct undermines the principles of trust and integrity that are essential to her role and the broader financial system.

Questions for Discussion:

1. Should Anna proceed with her plan, knowing that it would maximize overall happiness, or should she refrain due to the unethical nature of her actions? How does this situation challenge the utilitarian idea that the ends justify the means?
2. What are the ethical problems with Anna's approach, even if the outcomes are highly beneficial? Can the deliberate act of theft and deception ever be morally justified by the positive results it achieves?
3. How does Anna's potential betrayal of professional trust factor into the moral assessment of her actions? Is there a moral duty to uphold certain principles regardless of the potential positive outcomes?
4. Does Anna's case highlight a flaw in relying solely on outcome-based reasoning when making ethical decisions? What are the risks of justifying unethical actions solely based on their consequences?

Are there limits to using people to maximize utility?

Context: David, a data scientist at an insurance company, discovers a way to improve the company's risk models by using unapproved data from public sources like social media, location tracking, and health apps. This unauthorized data use would save the company millions, lower premiums for millions of customers, and increase industry efficiency—maximizing overall utility.

However, individuals whose data is used have not consented. One such person is Sarah, a single mother whose social media posts reveal stress and health struggles. The data also

tracks her late-night commutes, which the algorithm flags as high-risk, causing her insurance premiums to spike. Sarah is unaware that her personal information is being exploited, and she now faces higher costs that strain her already tight budget.

Ethical Dilemma: Although David's plan benefits the company and millions of policyholders, it comes at the expense of individuals like Sarah, who are harmed without their consent.

Discussion Questions:

1. Does the overall benefit justify the personal harm to individuals like Sarah?
2. How does the focus on maximizing utility overlook issues of consent and privacy?
3. Are there ethical limits to using data for the greater good?

Lecture 5 – Utilitarianism II – Dark patterns

When dark patterns maximize utility

Context: Emily is a UX designer at a popular online retail company. Her team is tasked with increasing sales and reducing returns. To achieve this, Emily designs several dark patterns on the website: misleading buttons that make it hard to opt out of upsells, auto-enrolled subscriptions that are difficult to cancel, and a checkout process that hides the final total until the very last step. These tactics significantly boost the company's revenue, reduce return rates, and improve quarterly results. The company can reinvest the profits into better services, lower prices for loyal customers, and improved employee benefits, creating broad positive impacts.

However, these dark patterns manipulate users into spending more than they intended, committing to unwanted subscriptions, and feeling frustrated by the shopping experience. One such customer, Alex, a college student on a tight budget, ends up unknowingly enrolled in a monthly subscription he can't easily cancel. His limited funds mean he has to cut back on essentials to afford the unexpected charges.

Ethical Dilemma: While Emily's design choices greatly benefit the company and its loyal customers, they exploit users like Alex, who are misled into decisions that harm them financially.

Discussion Questions:

1. Are the benefits to the company and other customers worth the harm caused to individuals like Alex?
2. How do manipulative design practices impact the trust between companies and their users?
3. Should companies prioritize profits and overall utility, even if it means exploiting customer behavior?

Using dark patterns in a fitness app

Context: Laura is a marketing manager for a popular subscription-based fitness app. The company is under pressure to increase user retention and minimize cancellations. To meet these goals, Laura's team implements dark patterns: the cancellation process is buried in the settings, requiring users to navigate through multiple confusing steps, including misleading prompts like "Are you sure you want to lose all your progress?" The app also uses subtle guilt tactics, like showing users how many workouts they'll miss if they cancel. These strategies successfully reduce churn rates, increase company revenue, and allow the app to offer more free trials to new users and fund community wellness programs.

However, this approach manipulates users into staying subscribed against their best interests. One user, Megan, a busy nurse who signed up during the pandemic, finds herself stuck paying for a service she no longer has time to use. The convoluted cancellation process frustrates her and drains funds she would rather use for her children's extracurricular activities.

Ethical Dilemma: While the dark patterns lead to greater retention and broader community benefits, they come at the expense of individuals like Megan, who are manipulated into spending money they can't afford on a service they don't use.

Discussion Questions:

1. Does the overall benefit of increased revenue and community support justify manipulating users like Megan?
2. How do these design tactics impact the long-term relationship between the company and its users?
3. Should companies be allowed to use manipulative designs if it leads to greater good, or is there a line that should not be crossed?

Lecture 6 – Kantian Ethics I – Property rights

The Leaked Algorithm

Context: Laura is a senior software engineer at a tech firm that has developed a groundbreaking algorithm for enhancing cybersecurity. This algorithm is a closely guarded trade secret, representing years of research and development. Laura discovers that her colleague, Mike, is contemplating sharing the algorithm with a rival company in exchange for a substantial bonus. Mike believes that by doing so, the rival company could offer improved security solutions, benefiting a wider range of users and potentially enhancing overall cybersecurity.

Ethical Dilemma: While Mike's intention to share the algorithm could lead to broader benefits, such as enhanced security for more users, it involves breaching the company's property rights and confidentiality agreements.

Should Laura report Mike's intentions to management?

Discussion Questions:

1. What should be Laura's decision?
2. What are the moral implications of breaching trade secrets in the tech industry?
How does protecting intellectual property contribute to a principled and trustworthy work environment?
3. Is it more important to uphold principles and agreements, even if it means potentially missing out on broader benefits? Why or why not?

The Stolen Code

Context: Alex is a software developer at a startup that has created an innovative accessibility tool for people with disabilities. The tool includes a unique code crucial for its personalized features. Alex discovers that his friend Jamie, who works at a larger tech company, is considering using this code without permission to enhance his company's product. Jamie believes this could improve accessibility for many users and boost his company's market presence.

Ethical Dilemma: While Jamie's use of the stolen code could benefit a wide audience, including improving accessibility for users, it involves taking Alex's intellectual property. This could harm Alex's startup and, more personally, affect users like Elena, a visually

impaired individual who relies on the specific features of Alex's tool. If the code is stolen, Elena might lose access to the personalized support she needs for her daily activities.

Alex decides to confront Jamie, emphasizing the importance of respecting intellectual property and protecting users like Elena. By doing so, Alex upholds the integrity of his work and safeguards the needs of individuals depending on the software.

Discussion Questions:

1. How does Alex's choice to protect the code reflect the importance of respecting intellectual property and individual contributions?
2. What are the personal impacts of using stolen intellectual property on users like Elena?
3. Is it justifiable to use someone else's intellectual property for broader benefits if it harms individuals or undermines their needs? Why or why not?

Lecture 7 – Kant II – open source

The Misused Open Source Code

Context: Jamie is a developer at a tech company that builds tools for non-profit organizations. Jamie integrates a widely-used open-source library into their latest project aimed at improving data management for various charities. The open-source license requires that any derivative works must be shared under the same open-source terms and include proper attribution.

Jamie's colleague, Sam, suggests modifying the library to include proprietary features and making the updated version closed-source. Sam argues that this approach could significantly boost the company's profits, which could then be redirected to support more charitable initiatives and expand their impact.

Ethical Dilemma: Although Sam's plan could increase funding for charity, it involves altering the open-source library in a way that contradicts its licensing terms and potentially misuses the community's resources. This could impact the open-source community by undermining the principles of open collaboration and fairness. On the other hand, the additional revenue could provide substantial benefits to various charitable organizations.

Jamie must decide whether to adhere to the open-source license and maintain the library's open nature, or to modify and restrict it for the potential benefit of charitable causes.

Discussion Questions:

1. Should Jamie follow the open-source license and keep the library open, or modify it for potential increased charitable impact?
2. What are the potential consequences of altering open-source software in violation of its license for both the community and users?
3. Is it ethically justifiable to restrict open-source software for financial gain if it could fund significant charitable work? Why or why not?

The Exclusive Feature

Context: Priya is a developer at a startup that has recently released an open-source project aimed at providing free educational tools for students. The project is growing in popularity, and the team is excited about its positive impact on education. However, Priya discovers that a major tech company is interested in adding exclusive premium features to their version of the open-source project and selling it commercially.

The tech company's plan involves taking the open-source code, integrating additional proprietary features, and selling the enhanced version with a subscription model. They argue that this could generate significant revenue that could be used to support further development and improvements to the original open-source project. This revenue will also help fund educational initiatives and reach more students.

Ethical Dilemma: While the potential revenue could support further development and educational outreach, it involves taking an open-source project and modifying it into a commercial product, which may conflict with the principles of open-source sharing and community collaboration. Assume that they find a way to not face legal consequences so her decision is purely an ethical one. Priya must decide whether to support the tech company's proposal, which could bring financial benefits and additional resources for the students, or to maintain the project's open-source status and uphold its original spirit of free access and collaboration.

Discussion Questions:

1. Should Priya support the tech company's plan to add exclusive features and sell the software, or maintain the open-source nature of the project, and why?
2. What are the potential impacts on the open-source community and the original goals of the project if it becomes a commercial product?

3. Is it ethically acceptable to commercialize open-source software if the proceeds are used to further support the project and related educational causes? Why or why not?