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Homework 3: Applying Ethical Frameworks

This ethical scenario revolves around the collection and use of customer data for commercial purposes, namely adding customers and persons related to them onto an email listing for coffee coupons. The main issues of contention in this scenario will revolve around user privacy concerns. Throughout this paper, analyses of this scenario will be provided from five different ethical perspectives: act-utilitarian, rule-utilitarian, deontological, social contract theory, and virtue ethics.

Following the reasoning of an act-utilitarian, I might accept the job. This ethical perspective prioritizes the maximization of overall happiness for the greatest number of people [1]. One argument that follows this logic is that by adding customers onto the coffee shop special deal mailing list, the majority of customers will have a better experience, as they will be able to buy their coffee at a discounted rate in the future. However, as a counterargument to this point, there may also be a large number of customers who are concerned about an invasion on their privacy. So, if we are trying to maximize the amount of satisfaction, an import consideration is how often non-customers are added to the mailing list. If this is a rare occurrence, then it makes much more sense to take the job, as the large majority of people affected are satisfied with this service. However, if a large number of non-customers are added to the mailing list, and the majority of them are upset over it, then it would make more sense not to take the job, as this would not maximize overall happiness.

Following the reasoning of a rule-utilitarian, I might not accept the job. This perspective suggests that we should follow rules that, when universally applied, lead to the greatest overall happiness for society [2]. Applying this framework to this scenario, we should consider the effect of granting all businesses the right to collect and use customer data that was not explicitly given to them. If this were the case, then people would constantly be getting emails, or much worse, from people and organizations they had never even heard of. This would be a major invasion of privacy and would lead to overall reluctancy to give any personal information to anyone at all. Thus, following this perspective, I wouldn’t take the job.

Following the reasoning of a deontological analysis, I would not take the job either. Deontological analyses are based on Kant’s categorical imperative, which places great importance on the adherence to moral guidelines and ethical obligations [3]. However, the nature of this job requires me to scour customer data for the contact of people who don’t necessarily want their contact information to be shared. Since these people have not explicitly given consent to sharing their information, this is an invasion of privacy. So, by upholding high moral standards, a deontological analysis would suggest that I don’t take the job.

Based on the guidelines outlined in the Social Contract Theory, I would also not accept the job. The Social Contract Theory is centralized on the idea that any rules or major actions that affect society should be decided upon through an implicit agreement between the individuals of that society [4]. This is clearly more aligned with the counterargument in this scenario. Since the non-customers of this coffee shop have obviously not given their explicit agreement to be added to the mailing list, they should not be. As such, I would not take the job if I adhered to the Social Contract Theory.

Lastly, if I followed the teachings of virtue ethics, I would again not accept this job. Virtue ethics emphasizes that ethical behavior should be measured by trait-based characteristics, such as honesty and integrity [5]. However, If I were to develop this service while aware that the technology I create will be used to violate the privacy of customers, then my actions would clearly be unethical. My actions would not be aligned with virtues such as honesty or integrity, so I would most definitely not accept this job.

Considering the different ethical perspectives discussed in this paper, I would not accept the job. The recurring issue of invading someone’s privacy is a major factor in this decision that raised concerns across all of the five ethical perspectives. As such, I would be more inclined to respect the privacy of the customer’s data and only be willing to add users who have consented to the terms and services outlined attached to using the Wi-Fi services. Thinking back to the five ethical perspectives, the only one that had any possibility of accepting the job would be if we utilized an act-utilitarian analysis. Along these lines, the majority of customers would be happy because they would be able to enjoy coffee at a discounted price. However, even this perspective would find issues with this job if too many non-customers were being added to the mailing list. The remaining four perspectives, rule-utilitarian, deontological, social contract theory, and virtue ethics, however, all took a firm stance on rejecting this job offer. They all found that the invasion of privacy being conducted on JDJ’s customers was out of line and overall unethical. After considering these multiple perspectives, I would ultimately decide not to accept this job for Java Du Jour.

One noteworthy strength of the rule-utilitarian perspective is the tendency to consider a scenario comprehensively, and one noteworthy weakness of the act-utilitarian perspective is that the decision to act in a certain situation depends greatly on the people of that environment. This strength of the rule-utilitarian perspective is especially good at considering what is happening at a larger context. In this scenario, it leads us to ask the question: what if everyone could collect anyone’s data? This is essentially the root question this ethical dilemma poses. While other perspectives also conclude that invading customer’s privacy is unethical, they don’t quite get to the root question as intuitively as the rule-utilitarian perspective. Thus, this perspective really helps understand the underlying principles that one would have to agree with if they took the job or turned it down. In regards to the weakness of the act-utilitarian perspective, for instance, if non-customers would rarely ever be added to the mailing list, then an act-utilitarian analysis would likely suggest that you take the job. However, if non-customers were often added, then there would be many more people being negatively affected and the overall happiness of this outcome would be less overall. Generalizing this weakness to other situations, this means that this perspective tends to ignore marginalized communities and instead favors the majority. This weakness is especially prevalent in today’s society, where marginalized groups and minorities should not be pushed aside in favor of the majority of people.

Works Referenced

[1] Wikipedia Contributors, “Act utilitarianism,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Act\_utilitarianism (accessed Sep. 15, 2023).

[2] Wikipedia Contributors, “Rule Utilitarianism,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rule\_utilitarianism (accessed Sep. 15, 2023).

[3] Wikipedia Contributors, “Deontology,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Deontology (accessed Sep. 15, 2023).

[4] Wikipedia Contributors, “Social Contract,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social\_contract (accessed Sep. 15, 2023).

[5] Wikipedia Contributors, “Virtue Ethics,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtue\_ethics (accessed Sep. 15, 2023).