**Applying Different Ethical Frameworks to a Dilemma**

Anthony Wong

Georgia Institute of Technology

CS3001: Computing & Society

Professor Melody Moore

September 19, 2022

In order to be able to consider what an act-utilitarian analysis would suggest in this situation, we need to consider both the benefits and consequences from taking the job. In this case, the main benefit is the lucrative coding job and everything that may come with it. On the other hand, the consequences are not as clear. We can say that the consequence is the violation of a person’s privacy, but these are not tangible. One could even argue in this case that those in the email list receive a benefit of the price of a small coffee, given that they receive a coupon for it. For this reason, it is likely that act-utilitarianism tells us to take the job.

In order to be able to consider what a rule-utilitarian analysis would suggest in this situation, we need to consider some universal rule that can maximize utility in this situation. One rule that we can apply in this situation is that the rights of people are not always inviolable. So long as something does not produce tangible harm and the action brings good, we can break certain rights. When we apply this rule to this scenario, we see that when we take this lucrative job and deliver on the things we are tasked, we can actually maximize utility. We get the lucrative job while other people have the potential of getting free small coffees. This action does not bring tangible harm and can be see as bringing much good. With this we can say that the rule-utilitarian analysis could suggest that we take the job.

In deciding what a deontological analysis would suggest in this situation, we must first decide which formulation of the categorical imperative we should use. The first formulation says, “act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws”. The issue with this formulation is that it is very difficult to universalize a moral rule. In this situation, it stems from the fact that the job itself is not inherently bad. The consequence is in enough of a grey area such that many people would have different views on it. Thus, it is hard to define a moral rule that, for example, says we should not take jobs that infringe on the privacy of others. What we define as privacy will vary between people, so this formulation is not the easiest to work with. The second formulation says, “act so that you always treat both yourself and other people as ends in themselves, and never only as a means to an end”. This is an easier formulation to apply in this scenario. In this case, we can say that in taking the lucrative job is treating others as means to an end, essentially treating others as steppingstones in getting the things you want. This is why a deontological analysis would tell us not to take the job.

In deciding what social contract theory would suggest, we look to John Rawls’ Principles of Justice to decide on the rules that society should strive for. To help us in this situation, we can look at the first principle, which states that “each person may claim a ‘fully adequate’ number of basic rights and liberties, such as freedom of thought and speech, freedom of association, the right to be safe from harm, and the right to own property, so long as these claims are consistent with everyone else having a claim to the same rights and liberties”. If we have this vantage point, we can also say that each person may also claim the right to privacy. Social contract theory says the following: “Morality consists in the set of rules, governing how people are to treat one another, that rational people will agree to accept, for their mutual benefit, on the condition that others follow those rules as well”. Because privacy is a right that each person is entitled to, and because these rules govern how people are to treat each other, we can conclude that social contract theory would suggest that we do not take the job.

In deciding what an analysis from virtue ethics would suggest we do, we first need to define relevant virtues in this situation. Virtues are described as “character traits human beings need in order to flourish and be truly happy”. With this definition, we can define compassion/caring for others as a virtue. When we define this as a virtue, we can also say that taking this lucrative job, which involves potentially violating the privacy of others, violates those virtues. In virtue ethics, “a right action is an action that a virtuous person, acting in character, would do in the same circumstances. A virtuous person is a person who possesses and lives out the virtues”. In order to maintain this, virtue ethics suggests that we don’t take the job.

The essence of this problem to me should be purely moral. Given the analysis on what the multiple theories above suggest, we see that the two utilitarian perspectives might have grounds to recommend taking the job, while the others may have grounds not to. To me, the utilitarian perspectives are not amazing barometers on what to do in this situation. Rather taking a moral stand on what should be done like the other theories, they seem to serve more as justifications to the potential consequences of taking the job. If we were to remove the free coffee from the equation, I would argue that it would be harder for at least rule-utilitarianism to suggest what it does. These perspectives also seem to lean on the ambiguity of what privacy is, alluding to the fact that the harms aren’t necessarily tangible or thought of equally across the population and so they carry less weight. To me, it is better to focus on deontology, social contract theory, and virtue ethics, since they focus more on the treatment of others, personal happiness, and fairness. These provide a more outward looking view of the situation. As stated above, all three of these theories suggest that we don’t take the job. Because of the nature of these theories and how they can be more easily generalized to others for the betterment of society, I would say that the ideal course of action would be to not take the job.

The strength of act-utilitarianism is in its practicality and simplicity. In deciding on taking in action, you discuss alternatives and sum the positive and negative consequences per alternative. The course of action with the largest total is then the preferred action to take. However, this also comes with its weaknesses. One significant one is that this perspective cannot predict with certainty the consequence of any action. Like in our lucrative job example, we cannot predict exactly what happens if we produce the code we are told to. We could misjudge the severity of privacy invasion of that level or even encounter unforeseen consequences. This can lead to errors in our calculations that make us choose wrong courses of action.