**Ethical Egoism and Software Engineering**  
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### **Finding Balance**

With technology advancing at an exponential rate, software engineers must tackle ethical issues with speed and agility. Data privacy, AI bias, and organizational optimization decisions all need a balance between altruism and egoism. They walk the line between prioritizing social good and profit. The goal and ultimately challenge is making technology accessible and fair while also earning profits.

### **Lessons from Trail Angels: Giving Without Creating Dependency**

Schwab et al. (2019) studied “trail angels”— people who donate their time, money, and supplies to long-distance hikers. They’ll host a barbecue for instance for hikers passing through or leave food and soda in a cooler along the route. This altruism is exemplary but some hikers start to take this ‘trail magic’ for granted, which changes the dynamic. This can be related to software engineering: how do we empower users without users being dependent upon the technology?

Social media was started as a way to connect the human race across the world and build meaningful relationships, but profits have driven algorithms to now prioritize money over users and even directly decreased the mental health of its user base. Big influential tech companies should support users, not manipulate them.

### **AI Ethics: The Risks of Prioritizing Profit**

The AI industry shows the clash between egoism and altruism clearly. AI has huge benefits but, when profit takes priority, bias and exclusion become real problems (Chagonda, 2024).

Big Tech’s rush to dominate AI often overlooks ethical concerns. Chagonda (2024) argues for an AI framework rooted in Ubuntu, which prioritizes community well-being, shared responsibility, and ethical decision-making over pure profit or efficiency. Ubuntu, an African philosophy centered on the idea that "I am because we are," emphasizes interconnectedness and mutual care, making it a strong foundation for AI ethics. Applying Ubuntu to AI development means ensuring that technology serves collective interests, reduces bias, and fosters inclusivity, rather than reinforcing existing inequalities or benefiting only those in power.

### **Ethics in Context: Software is Never One-Size-Fits-All**

Ethical decision-making depends on context. Sharon (2015) found that caregivers using monitoring technology had different takes on privacy—some felt it was an invasion, while others saw it as necessary for good care. The same thing happens in software engineering, where privacy expectations aren’t the same everywhere. A fitness app that shares user data might be totally fine in one country but break privacy laws in another. Developers need to think beyond just following the rules—they should build flexibility into their systems and make sure their tech actually respects user needs.

### **The Best Approach: Enlightened Ethical Altruism**

Software engineers don’t have to pick between doing what’s right and running a successful business. The smartest move is what I’d call “enlightened ethical altruism”—realizing that putting users first and making ethical choices leads to long-term success. Apple’s push for privacy proves the point. Positioning itself as the go-to brand for user security isn’t just the right thing to do—it’s a solid business strategy. In the long run, companies that build trust and stay transparent will outlast the ones that take shortcuts.

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### **Practical Steps for Ethical Software Development**

Build ethics into development from the start by identifying potential harm before the product launches. Test with diverse groups to catch biases early and ensure the technology works for everyone. Give users real control over their data so they can decide what is shared and what stays private. Do not wait for regulations because companies should take the lead in setting ethical standards instead of trying to fix problems after they arise.

**Conclusion**

Balancing ethical altruism and egoism is challenging but necessary. Software engineers must create technology that is profitable, innovative, and responsible. The goal is not just to build software but to build trust, sustainability, and long-term impact.

**References**

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