Module 2: Critical Thinking

Strict Kantianism

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Traditional Kantianism has the Categorical Imperative, which has two main points. One is “which is a moral principle which denotes that you should “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law” (Fieser, 2017, para. 19). This means that before we take an action we must consider if it would be okay if everyone else did the same action. The other main point in the Categorical Imperative is that we should “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” (Fieser, 2017, para. 26). This paper explores the relationships that traditional Kantianism has with software engineering ethics.

Consistency is one of the five C’s of ethical data science that relates to Kantianism. Patil claims that “failing to safeguard customer data breaks trust—and safeguarding data means nothing if not consistency over time” (Patil, 2018, para. 17). Facebook failed to safeguard their consumer’s data, where data collected from an application on Facebook was given to the political consulting firm Cambridge Analytica (Kozlowska, 2018). Under the categorical imperative, before making an action, one must think if an action would be okay if it was a universal rule. Claiming that consumer data is safe and secure, then sharing the information with other companies without the consent of the users is a violation of consistency and trust. The actions that Facebook took during this scandal were immoral under the categorical imperative because if nobody was consistent, then nobody would rely on anybody for anything.

Consent is another one of the five C’s of ethical data science which ties into traditional Kantianism. Trust between the users and the ones who are using the data cannot be established unless their consent has been explicitly given by the users for their data to be collected and used. The categorical imperative indicates that all humans have inherent value, and they should not be treated as instruments, therefore, we must acquire everyone’s consent before we collect and use their data.

I think Kantianism fits into software engineering ethics, although I do have some criticisms. Realizing that all humans have inherent value, and that you should not use them as a means to an end fit with the consent principal of software ethics, as obtaining consent to use their data is very important in order to maintain trust with the users who are using the software. We need to realize that in a data set with personal information, each piece of data represents a human, and we need to take great care to safeguard and respect their data. In the part of the categorical imperative where we must consider if the actions we take can be part of universal law sounds great at first, but it comes with the flaw that you do not consider the consequences of the actions, only if the action taken is just. Keeping our communities safe by using an AI solution to identify individuals who are a danger to society could be justified, since keeping communities safe from danger is a rule that could be considered universal, however, what isn’t considered is the consequences and impact of relying on an AI solution to determine who is a danger to the society, such as racial and sex discrimination. How can we justifiably decide if a software solution that we create will cause a positive impact to society, if we do not consider the impact and consequences that the solution will make?

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