Module 1: Critical Thinking

Subjective Relativism

Nolan Byrnes

CSC502 – Ethical Leadership in Software Development

Colorado State University – Global Campus

Professor Isaac Gang

May 23rd, 2022

Module 1: Critical Thinking

Quinn claims that “Subjective relativism holds that each person decides right and wrong for himself or herself” (Quinn, 2021, para. 2). What is right for one individual may not be right for another. Subjective relativism places the responsibility of deciding what is right and wrong onto the individual. It is important to consider ethics when designing and developing software because the programs that we develop effect other people’s lives. This paper discusses the relationships between Subjective Relativism and software engineering ethics.

Steinmann’s ethical principal of autonomy “refers to the freedom and capability of decision-making in individuals” (Steinmann, 2019, pg. 19). This principal relates to subjective relativism, as the individual decides whether something is right or wrong for them. Due to the California Consumer Privacy Act of 2018, when you visit a website, you will typically see a popup informing you that they use cookies and will give the chance to disable cookies that are used for ad tracking and stop the sale of your personal information (Healey, 2021, para. 2). As a consumer, I am happy that we do have this option, as I believe that we all have a right to decide whether a website should be allowed to collect data on us. Having the California Consumer Privacy Act in place has it to where the individual has autonomy over their personal data, which follows the ethical principal of autonomy and subjective relativism.

Steinmann’s ethical principal of do good or beneficence can be “defined as concern for the well-being of others” and mentions that the principal of do good or beneficence should be used “in a critical way, by asking, for example, whether a certain use of data does indeed yield any genuine benefits to participants or the public” (Steinmann, 2019, pg. 19). When using this ethical principal and answering the question on whether a specific action is going to benefit the public, is subjective. With subjective relativism, we have the freedom to decide if an action is right or wrong. When visiting websites, I have seen disclaimers that the website collects cookies and location data to provide you with more targeted advertisements, giving you a better experience. The question of does providing targeted advertising do good for the society is subjective. Personally, I do not visit website for their advertising, and I do not think targeted advertising benefits society either. Subjective relativism has a relationship with the ethical principal of do good or beneficence, as it is up to the individual on whether the actions, they are taking are benefiting the society.

Subjective relativism has a strong relationship with the ethical principles of autonomy and do good or beneficence. With autonomy, we all have a right to decide if a website can use cookies that track our personal data, and websites asking for our informed consent to allow them to track our data follows the principal of autonomy, and is relatable to subjective relativism, as all individuals have the right to decide whether something is right for them. Do good or beneficence has ties to subjective relativism as the principal of beneficence is subjective on how an action benefits a society, and according to subjective relativism, everyone decides on what is right, and what is wrong. I think subjective relativism is important when thinking of software engineering ethics as everyone should be able to decide on their own on what they feel comfortable with regarding how their personal data is treated. At the same time, subjective relativism allows developers to justify data collection to “improve the user experience” by providing targeted advertisements, which I do not agree with.

**REFERENCES**

Healey, J. (2021, September 1). *What are those annoying website popups about cookies? and what should you do about them?* Los Angeles Times. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.latimes.com/business/technology/story/2021-09-01/what-are-website-cookies-how-do-they-impact-internet-data

Steinmann, M., Matei, S., & Collmann, J. (2016). A Theoretical Framework for Ethical Reflection in Big Data Research. In J. Collmann & S. Matei (Eds.), Ethical Reasoning in Big Data: An Exploratory Analysis (pp. 11 – 27). Springer International Publishing.

Quinn, M. J. (2020). *Chapter 2 introduction to ethics subjective relativism - ethics for the information age by: Michael*. StuDocu. Retrieved May 23, 2022, from https://www.studocu.com/ph/document/university-of-rizal-system/social-and-professional-issues/chapter-2-introduction-to-ethics-subjective-relativism/21031378