

Transcript

Moral reasoning

We know that there is a compelling case for stopping and reflecting on the ethical implications of data science practices. What we can do and what we should do are not the same thing. Thinking about ethics means answering questions like, should I do this? What if we go down this path? To recognise that these questions apply in the first place involves moral awareness, which is the ability to see an ethical issue in an everyday situation.

Say, you're working with an algorithm or a data-sharing arrangement. It's taking a moment to say, hang on, there's an ethical issue there. You might not know what the answer is, but you do know that the decisions made about that data-sharing or algorithm have ethical implications or moral content. If you're not sure about whether a data decision has moral content, ask yourself, could somebody be harmed if we do this? If so, the issue has moral content. It presents an ethical dilemma. Or you might ask, how would I feel if my decision was broadcast all over Twitter? If that would make you feel uncomfortable, then it's likely that your decision and the issue has moral content.

Finally, think about whether there are any fundamental principles at stake in the issue. Think about how public CCTV data might be used to develop facial recognition algorithms. Would the decision to use that data have moral content? Why? Make some notes as you consider this question and join the discussion at the end of the video.

Developing our moral awareness involves exercising what has been called our moral imagination. Moral imagination is based on empathy for others, what we might call empathic understanding. Exercising moral imagination involves putting ourselves in the shoes of others, particularly those who have the least power in a situation, those who cannot easily influence the way things turn out. It also entails thinking about who we are or who we may become so that we can take hold of our own behaviour. As we move through this course, you will be given the chance to practice these ways of thinking.

So much of how we think and act involves taken-for-granted mental shortcuts and ways of looking at a situation. But we are often not aware that these thinking shortcuts or mental models are shaping the way we frame a situation. An example of a thinking shortcut is a cognitive bias such as prejudices, hindsight bias, essentialism, halo effect, fundamental attribution errors, to name a few. Many of the things we take for granted in the data world are a result of the different mental models and frames of thinking we use to describe and explain what is going on. These frames act as a kind of filter roll lens, clarifying some aspects of a situation but blocking consideration of other aspects.

Think about the long held assumption that technological progress is a good thing, and so we should race ahead with an algorithm if we can see its usefulness. Or the idea that we really do need to use images scraped from the internet if we want to develop the best facial recognition technology. In practice, jumping to these assumptions can lead to decisions which have far-reaching and unintended consequences. Moral imagination compels us to think about those who may be compromised by these decisions by putting ourselves in their shoes.

So let's unpack the elements of ethical thinking and action, and the kinds of things that influence how we think and act. You may not have thought about this, but how we think and act is shaped by several factors. They might include things like our life experiences, our taken-for-granted ways of thinking and assumptions we make, cultural values, life experiences including family, the culture of organizations of which we are a part, professional cultures, the systems and practices that our organizations adopt, broader institutional context, regulatory and legal systems. When we develop our ethical thinking capacities, we learn to reflect on these factors and how they shape our actions.

The first element in our model of ethical thinking and action is the moral awareness we have been talking about. It involves moral imagination, empathic understanding, and a recognition of the mental models and other factors that shape our thinking and behaviour. Once we have recognised the decision or action has moral content, we need to decide what's right or wrong. We need a template or framework against which to evaluate an issue or practice that has moral content.

In business and professional life, there are some key frameworks or ethical perspectives that can apply. Each of these frameworks is grounded in the field of moral philosophy and provide us with ways of thinking about ethical dilemmas. We can build up a toolbox of templates and frameworks to apply to various ethical dilemmas. We can use those frameworks to guide our moral judgment, which then guides us towards ethical behaviour. But they are topics for another conversation.

Head to the discussion forum and join the conversation with your colleagues to consider the question from earlier in this video. Facial recognition algorithms could be developed using public CCTV data. Would the decision to use that data have moral content? Why?