Transcript

What do we mean by ethics?

What do we mean by ethics?

The idea of a data society implies both a promising future for humanity and one that is not. What do concepts like justice, privacy, and voice? This is where ethics comes in.

But first let's start with a what do we mean when we talk about ethics?

Ethics is simply what is good and right, for human beings and more broadly. The word comes from the Greek *ethos*, meaning character or custom. It's a way of thinking about whether decisions or actions are right or wrong.

Ethics is underpinned by the discipline of moral philosophy, which provides tools and frameworks for reasoning and reflecting on whether something is right or good.

Now, moral philosophy is different from morality, which is about acceptable social practices in a culture.

Ethics differs from other areas of study such psychology, science or economics, in that it is a normative undertaking. The aim of ethical thinking is to discover what ought to be, rather than simply describing what is, or predicting what will probably happen. We think about what should we do, not what we have already done. For example, various apps can collect and sell app users' location data. This happens, but should they?

When we think about ethics, we start to think about things like rights, justice, duties, and stakeholders. About the intended and unintended consequences of our decisions… We bring to the foreground questions like: How do we ensure wellbeing for people? How do we share the benefits and power that comes from data science more fairly?

All of these questions come up when we turn our attention to ethics. But before I continue let's move now to what ethics isn't.

Firstly, ethics are not the same as values. Values are what society considers important or what individuals consider important. They are influential, but not all there is to ethics. What happens when there are conflicts between values, like loyalty and honesty? When values are in conflict, this gives rise to ethical dilemmas.

Also, what if a society's prevailing values fail to further human good? What if they are simply wrong? For example, in Western industrialised countries up until the mid-19th century, it was widely held that the practice of slavery could be justified by solid economic arguments. The idea that the fundamental human rights of those enslaved were being violated gradually became more widely accepted, but it took centuries for the recognition that slavery was wrong to become the 'majority view'. So we cannot assume that just because the majority of members of a society consider something to be right, it is ethical. We'll come back to this when we consider ethical relativism.

Secondly, ethics and the law are not equivalent. Legislation typically reflects a society's ideals, norms and values at a particular time and place. However, the law can be slow to change and often reflects only the values and norms of those in positions of power. Stop and think for a moment. Can you think of a situation that was legal but not ethical? The former

apartheid system in South Africa is a well-known example of a legal system that was clearly not ethical.

In the business world, legislation is generally reactive, and laws are often triggered by problems that have already occurred, for better or for worse. Workplace health and safety laws, for example, have typically been developed in response to catastrophic industrial accidents and employee deaths – they are examples of laws developed after something has gone wrong. We can say the same about technology-related laws, as we'll see later on in the course. Following the law may be not all there is to being ethical.

A good way to think about the relationship between ethics and the law is to remember that bringing about justice requires both the law and ethics, in concert with each other.

Finally, ethics is not the same as standards. Standards can codify the accepted way of doing things, but there will always be loopholes. Exploiting loopholes or grey areas in standards may not be ethical. Ethical issues are complex and difficult, and can't necessarily be captured unambiguously in an explicit rule or standard.

So that's what ethics isn't.

As we learn about ethics we can think about it at three different levels, the micro, the organisational and the macro.

At the micro level we encounter questions about the rightness or wrongness of individual decisions and actions. Even about the type of person an individual is. Professional ethics, and codes of ethics, shape our behaviour as individuals.

At the organisational level we encounter questions about organisational decisions, strategies, and actions. Although it is individuals who make decisions, they are very much shaped by the culture, values and priorities of the organisations they work in.

At the macro level we look at societies, and the economic, political, legal and other systems which shape our everyday lives. Questions about social surveillance, the misuse of data for political ends, and surveillance capitalism come to mind.

So you'll encounter ethical issues at any of those three levels. But something to remember is that there is often no absolutely correct answer to an ethical question, but there's usually a better answer, one which is justifiable through ethical reasoning and is the most fitting under the circumstances, as we shall see.

Ethics should always be seen in the context of a particular situation.

Developing skills in ethical thinking includes developing a capacity for reflecting on your own behaviours and assumptions, as well as on the role and workings of our data society.

As you develop these skills, you may find yourself outside your comfort zone, questioning things you may have taken for granted up until now.

This is a journey, one that is both challenging and exciting. I'm looking forward to continuing it with you.