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PHIL 3103

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In 2012, a team of researchers at Cornell University teamed up with Facebook to perform an experiment testing whether emotions can be transferred through social media. This experiment involved manipulating the content of 689,003 Facebook users’ newsfeeds to control whether each person was exposed to happier or sadder posts. Facebook filtered out posts with positive buzzwords in them to create a sadder newsfeed, and vice versa. Afterwards, each person’s status updates and comments would then be monitored to see if the person generated happier or sadder posts depending on the overall emotion of their newsfeed. The results showed that people tended to produce happier posts when met with happier newsfeeds, and when met with sadder newsfeeds, the reverse was true.

Facebook was met with significant debate about this study. The question is, was this action on Facebook and the researchers’ part morally permissible? While some believe that in order for an experiment to be acceptable, its users who participated in the study should have been notified and given a choice of whether to participate or not, others believe that the users *were* notified—in the form of Facebook’s User Agreement Policy, which everyone is supposed to have read before signing up.

Facebook and the group of researchers were in the wrong here; the study’s subjects should have been informed of the possible risks of the study before being subject to it potentially against their will. The only way to conduct a morally acceptable experiment is to inform the subjects of the possible risks of it and allow them to excuse themselves from it. Since Facebook's study involved experimenting on people who weren't notified of the study at all (much less its risks), it was not morally permissible for Facebook and the researchers to conduct this experiment.

P1: facebook’s thing they did counts as experimentation

Okay who would argue with this. Insert definition of experiment.

Because this argument only applies to experiments, it must be decided whether Facebook’s study counts as an experiment. Experiments have risks, which is why experimenters are required by legal standards to inform their subjects and allow them a way to opt out of the study. Facebook's study carries definite risks, albeit minor, to the user. As a result, the study can be considered an experiment for the sake of this argument.

P2: you need to tell people before you experiment on them, or else that’s morally wrong

BECAUSE: otherwise, they don’t get to back out (stop using fb for the duration of the experiment) and that means you’re taking away their choice to control what happens to them. You’re making them unhappy without their consent. AS OPPOSED TO people being told “hey, you might be made sad in this experiment, opt out by clicking <here>.

It doesn't matter how trivial the risks might be. The user should have the ability to choose whether to subject themselves to these risks, and to take that ability away from them is immoral.

P3: facebook didn’t tell people.

Fb’s user policy is way too vague to cover this. Nobody actually signed up for this when they decided to use facebook. Nobody thought this was a risk. Sure, we ‘agreed’ to it, but like, isn’t there an implied “we won’t fuck with you” when you’re about to use a website that’s so worldwide?? Like, there are regulations on user agreements for a reason, and this is it. So websites can’t take advantage of you.

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C: facebook was morally wrong to do the thing

Part 3: But tara! What about blah blah bleep bloop ()?? Well, here’s what I say to your bleep bloop!

BUT TARA THAT MIGHT INTRODUCE BIAS. Maybe fb didn’t want anybody to know because people react when you tell them theyre being watched. But you don’t have to tell them what they’re being observed for! Tell them “hey we’re doing a random study, you might be sadder, no biggie just opt out if you’re not into that” without hinting at them to watch out for if their newsfeed just got suddenly happier / sadder.

SOURCES

<http://www.pnas.org/content/111/24/8788.full> (actual study article, includes researcher names)

<http://www.theguardian.com/technology/2014/jun/29/facebook-users-emotions-news-feeds> (more info on study)

PHIL: 3103 Ethics and the Professions

Paper Assignment

**Basic Information**

Due September 25th (by 5pm). Submit via the SafeAssign Link you can find on Blackboard.

**Formatting/Length Requirements**

Double spaced, normal font (e.g. Times New Roman), 1 inch margins [you can choose other fonts and margins, but whatever you come up with had better be reasonably close to a double spaced, 1 inch margin, TNR fonted paper], with a length of 2-3 pages. You’re allowed to do more, if you insist, but I will probably not read past page 6 or 7 (unless it’s super good and I think it’s worth the time haha).

**What You’re Supposed to Do**

Generally speaking, you must complete one of the two following options:

(i) Identify a specific issue recently or currently faced by a *specific* professional or *small group* of professionals. If you choose this option, you must identify specific individuals by name.

Example issue:

-- Is Dr. Mark Puder morally obligated to conduct a placebo-controlled study of his experimental drug, Omegaven?

Or (ii) Identify a *general* issue recently or currently faced by professionals. If you choose this option, you need not identify specific individuals facing the issue; rather, you may speak in general about whatever profession is in question.

Example issue:

-- Is it morally permissible for engineers to participate in designing armed drones for military use?

If you choose a specific case occurring in the past, please choose something which happened within the last five or so years. Also, please select an issue regarding which there is, has been, or will likely be significant disagreement.

You are to select a contentious sort of example because, speaking now more specifically, I want you to do a few things after making the selection: (**A**) explain the ways in which people respond to it (i.e., explain where the disagreement comes in); (**B**) provide an *argument* for the response that you find most morally acceptable (or morally obligatory); and (**C**) respond to at least one possible criticism of your argument.

The parts of your paper that satisfy (A) should be relatively brief. I only need a few paragraphs to introduce the issue and explain the possible ways of responding that people have proposed. I don’t need any flowery introduction; just get straight to the issue with the first sentence and explain how things are.

The main point of the paper, where most of the grading scrutiny will be focused, is (B): a discussion of the reasons supporting your position (the *argument* for your position). In supporting your position, you may, *if you like*, reference one of the following moral theories or views regarding appropriate professional behavior:

• Act Utilitarianism;

• Kant’s moral view (either formulation of the Categorical Imperative—you need not discuss both formulations);

• Davis’s (“legalism”) account of professional responsibility and rule-following;

• Whichever of Bayles’s models for appropriate professional-client relationships you find most plausible.

(If you choose one of Bayles’s models, you must briefly explain why you find your chosen model to be the most plausible.)

\*\*Note that while the first three of the above are relevant to nearly any moral issue, the last two are relevant only in particular cases (e.g., Davis’s account will be relevant only if you are addressing an issue of professional rule-following).

You don’t have to appeal to any of the foregoing when constructing your argument. It might very well be that you have a specific principle in mind, which you think is true, that governs how professionals ought to behave in the situation you’ve picked. The idea is that you can use these theories or views to provide an argument for your position. Let me give you an example or two:

*Example 1: I’ll argue that it is permissible for engineers to participate in the design of drones for military use. Why? Well, the act utilitarian says roughly that we should do those things that generate the most happiness for the most people. It seems pretty clear that the production of drones, while killing some people, eliminates important threats that minimize death and destruction elsewhere. Since the net benefits (vis-à-vis happiness) are greater with their production than with the production of drones being prohibited, engineers are justified in participating in their design.*

*Example 2: I’ll argue that it is impermissible for engineers to participate in the design of drones for military use. Why? Well, the Kantian says that we should treat people with respect and always as ends. But the production of aircraft that kills other people plainly treats them not as important in their own right (not as ends)—but rather as some kind of obstacle to everyone else being happy. So participating in the design of drones means that engineers are violating a duty they have not to kill other people. It is therefore not morally ok for them to do so*.

Finally, there is the (C) part of the paper: the response to one criticism. Here the idea is that you briefly explain some sort of criticism someone could have for your argument, then give a response to it. I focus on this part of your paper more than the (A) part, but less than the (B). I would like for you to try to think (hard) about what your opponent would say and provide the strongest criticism for your argument; please don’t simply pick any old (weak) criticism and respond to it. Actually engage in some critical thinking and put yourself in your counterpart’s shoes. Here are some examples, building off the examples just mentioned.

*Criticism and Response to Example 1: Someone who is unimpressed with the utilitarian line of thought would probably say that it is simply unacceptable to kill anyone, even if it means saving more lives in the process. There is the principle not to kill anyone, and that is a principle that is more important to follow than the principle to save lives. Since we have a clash of those principles here, we have to go with the one that is most important. The best response to this criticism is that it involves a kind of rule-worship that is strained and outlandish. If the point of the principle of not killing is to keep people alive, then why not do whatever it takes to keep as many people alive as possible? In this case that means, unfortunately, developing drones that do kill people.*

*Criticism and Response to Example 2: Someone who is unimpressed with the Kantian line of thought would probably say that following rules as he recommends we do would be just counterproductive. The point of doing the right thing is to save lives and that’s what we should do. The best response is to remind ourselves that the point of morality is to tell us what kind of actions we are allowed to do and not allowed to do. The consequences aren’t what matter; it’s the nature of the action itself. And when the action is knowingly and intentionally participating in the design of technology that results in the killing of people, it’s not an action that we are allowed to do.*

**Some Further Content Requirements**:

I would like for your paper to involve at least a little bit of actual research. I don’t want you to have to look far—finding something in the textbook is totally permissible—but I want the issue you make your argument about to be one that is actual. So please get the information regarding your issue from a reputable news or professional source. Acceptable sources are limited to the following:

-- the textbook;

-- newspapers;

-- good news broadcasts (such as “60 Minutes” and “Nightline”);

-- good radio programs (such as “All Things Considered” or “To The Best Of Our Knowledge”);

-- reputable magazines and journals (such as Time), including professional journals (such as The Journal of the American Medical Association);

-- websites associated with one of the above (for example, cnn.com and pbs.org/newshour/);

-- professional websites (such as <http://www.nspe.org/>).

\*\*If you would like to use a source not covered by this list, please check with me first.

If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask me by emailing [dbarrett@email.uark.edu](mailto:dbarrett@email.uark.edu) or [dbarrett@uark.edu](mailto:dbarrett@uark.edu) .