Ethics: Core Concepts and Perspectives

Overview of Ethics

"Ethics" is generally the philosophy of right and wrong behavior. Every profession has standards of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. Whatever profession you enter, it is advisable to familiarize yourself with the code of ethics common to that profession. But beyond practical issues of getting and keeping a job, avoiding lawsuits, being well-regarded by colleagues and such, are there any deeper reasons why one course of action should be preferred over another? Such questions are especially pertinent when disruptive new technologies like generative artificial intelligence enter the scene, technologies for which clear boundaries of acceptable use are not subject to any prior consensus. Given such absolutely innovative and emergent technologies, what is the "right" and the "wrong" approach?

https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethics.

Four Types of Ethical Theories

Many authors down through the centuries have written on ethics, but to keep things relatively simple for our purposes, we will begin by grouping these theories into four major types. These types are: 1) virtue ethics, 2) deontology, 3) consequentialism, 4) discourse ethics.

Virtue Ethics

Virtue ethics is based on trying to become a good person. The "right" thing to do is found by attempting to practice or embody some characteristic of what a good person is considered to be. Such virtues include things like charity, fairness, honesty, prudence, justice, or compassion. Many religions or philosophies dating back to ancient times promote virtue ethics.

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/.

Deontology

The word "deontology" comes from the Greek for "duty". In deontological ethics there is an absolute requirement to take or avoid certain actions no matter what. Such absolute behavioral requirements may come from revealed religion (like the Ten Commandments), general philosophical or spiritual perspectives (like the Golden

Rule), or from human universals uncovered through rigorous logic and reason (such as Kant's Categorical Imperative).

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-deontological/.

Consequentialism

Consequentialist philosophies, such as utilitarianism, are based on rational calculations of the greatest good for the greatest number. This type of thinking is deeply embedded in many economic models. For consequentialism, actions are not intrinsically right or wrong. The justification for any action must be found in its results. A potential drawback to consequentialism is that the minorities may be marginalized or exploited, as long as overall results are optimal for society as a whole.

https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/consequentialism/.

Discourse Ethics

Discourse ethics is a relatively recent approach, most associated with the work of German philosopher Jürgen Habermas. In contrast to Kant, Habermas grounds any sense of duty in social consensus established through dialog. This approach is called "discourse" ethics because it is deeply associated with the theory of language and culture. Basically, we all have experiences (our lifeworlds) that can only be communicated through the exchange of linguistic symbols. Through expansive circles of dialog and consensus, reasonable actors can establish general rules of behavior acceptable to all.

https://plato.stanford.edu/ENTRIES/habermas/#DiscEthi.

The Approach to Ethics in this Class

The class itself will function generally under discourse ethics guidelines. Namely, the class assumes participants are reasonable actors, capable of communicating linguistically, quite possibly having differences of opinion, stemming from among other things, different life experiences. The class as a whole may or may not achieve consensus on questions of virtue, duty, or social benefit for various IT security technologies and practices. For grading purposes, there are no "right" answers to questions of virtue or duty where hacking techniques are concerned - feel free to advance your own opinions on these matters. Graded assignments will be evaluated based on your participation in the discussion process and the knowledge you exhibit about ethical perspectives advanced by thought leaders we study in this course.