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Prompt 1

Kantianism, in comparison with both the Contractarianism and Contractualism perspectives of Contract-Theory and the Utilitarianism ethical viewpoint, is the most promising ethical theory in dealing with computing and networking issues. The rules-based nature of Kantianism offers four key relative advantages compared to the alternatives: judgement based on currently available facts, fairness, consistency, and respect for individuals.

Deontologists like Kant argue “actions are intrinsically good because the follow from logic….We can reason about what makes sense and act accordingly, or we can act irrationally, which is evil” (Baase 32). By nature of this position, such reasoning can be done a priori, based on available facts and knowledge, before any action is taken. The ability to evaluate the rightness or wrongness of an action before the action is taken is of vital importance in the context of computing issues because, given the pace of technological change, the results of an action taken today may have unpredictable or even unknowable consequences even in the near term.

This a priori nature of Kantianism contrasts directly with Utilitarianism’s appeal to often incalculable effects. For sure some of the most salient consequences of the development of the internet were both not predicted and took years or decades to become clear. An ethical theory that cannot evaluate some actions until sometimes considerably after the fact has rather diminished utility in helping us how to act right now.

Kantianism also has the advantage of being fair from the perspective that actions are judged, in principle, with volition of the actors specifically reflected. If an agent is acting or intending to act according to a well-established ethical rule, she may safely assume with relative safety that she is doing her duty. In comparison, from a Utilitarianism perspective, the necessity of an ambiguous calculation of the net change in aggregate happiness may mire her in a state of doubt she is ill trained to resolve and may cause her to be judge harshly, perhaps unfairly, if her calculation proves flawed at a later date.

This ethical reassurance has real value in the field of computing with respect to consistency in conduct. An Artificial Intelligence researcher, an entry level engineer, and an entrepreneur with a new product idea are all called to make judgements of ethical importance while also working in a very competitive field often with intense focus on the end goal. We presume such professionals are interested in acting ethically but also recognize other pressures driving behavior such as financial reward, status, and innovation. It is reasonable to expect that relatively clear rules such as “protect personally identifiable information” will be applied more consistently than each individual’s answer to the question “how does the treatment of this data affect the world’s happiness in aggregate?” or deference to a perhaps arbitrary contract enforced by a sovereign.

Finally, Kantianism also is the mostly likely of these three ethical theories to respect individuals. In Utilitarianism, it is easy to imagine circumstances were harming an individual could be argued to increase total happiness and thus be considered ethical. For example, there may be a case for releasing complete individual medical records to epidemiologists without the consent of the patients. Even from an “act utilitarianism” perspective, “a utilitarian would be more comfortable than a deontologist breaking a rule in circumstances where doing do would have good consequences” (Baase 33). What if that rule is “a individual has exclusive right to the use of their property?”

The Contractarianism form of Contract-Theory likewise diminishes respect for individuals. In Hobbes’ version, individuals are willing to subjugate more or less all their individual rights to a sovereign, literally a monarch or state in his meaning. Locke may have a rosier vision in which people may their most basic rights, but the concept of surrendering others remains.

On the contrary, Rawls’ Contractualism perspective on Contract-Theory offers, in principle, a great deal of respect for individuals in the sense that, in negotiating the terms of society from behind the veil of ignorance, each individual must finally agree that those terms are fair to each lot in life. While such a view does indeed seem to be a good policy making tool, the highly subjective nature of this approach reduces its usefulness in dealing with computing and networking issues.

Kantianism, however, is explicit about the need to treat each individual as an end in himself or herself, rather than a means. The inherent value and respect that this straightforward rule confers on every human is a strong starting place for considering ethical issues relating to technology and society.

Prompt 2

Works Cited

Baase, Sarah and Timothy M. Henry. *A Gift of Fire: Social, Legal, and Ethical Issues for*

*Computing Technology*. Fifth Edition, Pearson, 2017, New York.