

Ethics and Policy Issues in Computing

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Today

- Four views of ethics
 - Important distinctions
 - Demo debate
-
- Next time: Ethics continued, debate #1

Ethics

What is Ethics:

- Study of what it means to “do the right thing”
- Assumes people are rational and make free choices
- Rules to follow in our interactions and our actions that affect others

What Does Ethics Have to Do with Computers?

- We don't have courses in ethics and office furniture . . .
- We don't have courses in the "Law of the Horse"*

*Remarks of L. Lessig.

What is Computer Ethics?

- “What is revolutionary about computers is logical malleability.”
- As computers become pervasive, the effect is *transformative*:
 - Not “‘how efficiently do computers count votes in a fair election?’ but ‘what is a fair election?’”
 - Not “‘how well do computers help us work?’ but ‘what is the nature of this work?’”
 - Not “‘how well do computers count money?’ but ‘what is money?’”
 - Not “‘how well do computers educate?’ but ‘What is education?’”
- Operate invisibly
 - Sabre reservations and American Airlines
 - Google?

Ethical Theories- 1

- Deontological
 - The nature of the action itself
 - Rules such as universality
 - Issue 1: What is the basis for these rules?
 - Issue 2: Too rigid?
- Utilitarianism
 - Consequences determine if an act is good
 - Should act to increase “happiness” or “utility”
 - “Act” versus “rule” utilitarianism
 - Issue 1: How to add up the consequences?
 - Issue 2: Consider how utility is distributed?

Ethical Theories- 2

- Natural rights
- Virtue ethics
 - Judge an act by what it reveals of virtue and character
 - Takes account of complexity, role of experience, wisdom
 - No rigid rules, at best rules of thumb
 - Issue 1: virtues may point in opposite directions
 - Issue 2: relativistic, virtues are culturally defined

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-virtue/>

Ethics (cont.)

If there is no clear answer, why consider these theories at all?

Important Distinctions:

- Right, wrong and okay
- Negative rights (liberties)
 - The right to act without interference
- Positive rights (claim-rights)
 - An obligation of some people to provide certain things for others

Ethics (cont.)

Important Distinctions (cont.):

- Difference between wrong and harm
- Personal preference and ethics
- Law and Ethics

Discussion

- Can you think of examples of liberties (negative rights) and claim-rights (positive rights) that are at opposition to each other?
 - Speech?
 - Property?

Discussion / Q&A
