CIS 381: Social & Ethical Issues of Computing

Ethical Frameworks

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Technological Advances

• Computing
  - Calculators, Mainframes, Personal Computers, Mobile Devices

• Networking
  - Telegraph, Telephone, Radio/TV, Internet & TCP/IP, Wifi

• Information Storage & Retrieval
  - Printing Press, HyperText, GUIs, WWW, Search Engines
Takeaways

• Revolutionary discoveries are rare; change is usually incremental
• Social conditions give rise to new technologies
• Adoption of technologies can change society
• Rate of technological change accelerating
Define society, ethics, & morality
Society, Ethics, and Morality

- **Society**
  - Association of people organized under a system of rules
  - People may belong to more than one society
- **Morality**
  - From Latin *moralis* (custom)
  - Actions are moral if they are “good” or worthy of praise
- **Ethics**
  - From Greek ἡθος (custom)
  - The formal study of moral standards and conduct
- **Goal**: construct a general basis for deciding what is moral

[S. Abraham, 2018 (modified)]
Morality vs. Ethics
Ethical Frameworks

• Systems that guide ethical choices and provide a reason for that choice
• This is an unsolved problem!
• Many approaches that result in vastly different outcomes and behaviors
• Broad categories:
  - Relativism → non-workable
  - Duty-based (non-consequentialist) framework
  - Consequentialist framework
  - Virtue framework

[S. Abraham, 2018 (modified)]
Relativism and Subjective Relativism

- Relativism
  - No universal standards of right and wrong
  - One person can say “X is right,” another can say “X is wrong,” and both can be correct

- Subjective relativism
  - Each person decides right and wrong for himself or herself
  - “What’s right for you may not be right for me”
Case for Subjective Relativism

- Well-meaning and intelligent people disagree on moral issues
- Ethical debates are disagreeable and pointless
  - Easy solution to issues like abortion?
Case Against Subjective Relativism

• Blurs line between doing what you think is right and doing what you want to do
• Makes no moral distinction between the actions of different people
  - Hitler vs. Mother Theresa
• Subjective Relativism and tolerance are different
  - Tolerance is a rule, but relativism has no rules
• Decisions may not be based on reason
Not workable
Cultural Relativism

• What is “right” and “wrong” depends upon a society’s actual moral guidelines
• These guidelines vary from place to place and from time to time
• A particular action may be right in one society at one time and wrong in another society or at another time
Case for Cultural Relativism

- Different social contexts demand different moral guidelines
  - The environment
- It is arrogant for one society to judge another
Case Against Cultural Relativism

- Because two societies do have different moral views doesn’t mean they **ought** to have different views.
- It doesn’t explain **how** moral guidelines are determined.
- What if there are no cultural norms?
- It doesn’t account for the evolution of moral guidelines.
- It provides no reconciliation for cultures in conflict.
- Existence of many acceptable practices does not imply all practices are acceptable (**many/any fallacy**).
- Societies do, in fact, share certain core values.
  - Caring for babies.
- Only indirectly based on reason.
Not workable
How do humans actually make decisions?

- Antonio Damasio studied patients with brain lesions that make them unable to feel emotions.
- Patients also had trouble making decisions despite being able to phrase the choice in logical terms.
- Implication: emotion is a requisite part of decision-making.
- Neuroimaging also supports that human emotion influences the reasoning part of the brain.

[S. Abraham, 2018]
How does this impact ethics?

• Humans make choices without realizing they’ve already decided
• Core feelings and beliefs (and implicit biases) have a huge, unseen impact on our decision making
• It is difficult for an individual have a “fair and balanced” perspective

[S. Abraham, 2018]
Is Google Making Us Stupid?

• Link
• Published in 2008
• Questions, Comments, Agree/Disagree?
Discussion
Questions

• Do you notice a difference in how you read on the Web versus how you books or magazines?
• Do you tend to be an early adopter of new technologies or do you wait until many of your friends have adopted them?
• How have technologies have changed your life?
• How have technologies changed society?
• Do you see the technological advances described in Chapter 1 of the textbook as positive or negative?
"In the world of 2001, people have become so machinelike that the most human character turns out to be a machine. That’s the essence of Kubrick’s dark prophecy: as we come to rely on computers to mediate our understanding of the world, it is our own intelligence that flattens into artificial intelligence."

– N. Carr