

Scenario 1

Alexis, a gifted high school student, wants to become a doctor. Because she comes from a poor family, she will need a scholarship in order to attend college.

Some of her classes require students to do extra research projects in order to get an A. Her high school has a few older PCs, but there are always long lines of students waiting to use them during the school day. After school, she usually works at a part-time job to help support her family.

One evening Alexis visits the library of a private college a few miles from her family's apartment, and she finds plenty of unused PCs connected to the Internet. She surreptitiously looks over the shoulder of another student to learn a valid login/password combination. Alexis returns to the library several times a week, and by using its PCs and printers she efficiently completes the extra research projects, graduates from high school with straight A's, and gets a full ride scholarship to attend a prestigious university.

Kantian

Alexis did wrong when she made use of a student's login and password to gain access to the library's computers and printers. Alexis treated the student as a means to her end of getting access to the private college's computers.

Act utilitarian

The benefits to Alexis were large. The harms to others were small. Her action was morally acceptable.

Rule utilitarian

A rule utilitarian is likely to subscribe to the rule "Gaining access to another person's private information is wrong," since a great deal of harm can result if people were unable to protect confidential information such as credit card numbers. For this reason, Alexis did wrong when she used someone else's login and password to access the library's computers and printers.

Social contract theory

Alexis violated the property rights of the private college when she used its computers without permission. Her action was wrong.

Scenario 2

An organization dedicated to reducing spam tries to get Internet service providers (ISPs) in an East Asian country to stop the spammers by protecting their mail servers. When this effort is unsuccessful, the anti-spam organization puts the addresses of these ISPs on its “black list.” Many ISPs in the United States consult the black list and refuse to accept email from the blacklisted ISPs. This action has two results. First, the amount of spam received by the typical email user in the United States drops by 25 percent. Second, tens of thousands of innocent computer users in the East Asian country are unable to send email to friends and business associates in the United States.

Kantian

The anti-spam organization is treating the innocent computer users in the East Asian country as means to its end of reducing spam. That is wrong.

Act utilitarian

Millions of people are getting much less spam. The benefit to each of these persons is small, but meaningful. Tens of thousands of citizens of the East Asian country cannot send email to the United States. The harm to each of these persons is significant. Concluding whether the action is right or wrong depends upon the weight you give to each person's benefit or harm.

Rule utilitarian

The challenge with this scenario is to determine whether any moral rules have been broken. In general, utilitarianism is comfortable with the notion that maximizing the overall good may mean that the majority gains a benefit while the minority suffers the harm.

Social contract theory

The residents of the East Asian country had a reasonable expectation that their email would be delivered. By blacklisting the country's ISPs, the anti-spam organization encouraged American ISPs to refuse to forward email. This seems wrong.

Scenario 3

In an attempt to deter speeders, the East Dakota State Police (EDSP) installs video cameras on all of its freeway overpasses. The cameras are connected to computers that can reliably detect cars traveling more than five miles per hour above the speed limit.

These computers have sophisticated image recognition software that enables them to read license plate numbers and capture high resolution pictures of vehicle drivers. If the picture of the driver matches the driver's license photo of one of the registered owners of the car, the system issues a speeding ticket to the driver, complete with photo evidence.

Six months after the system is put into operation, the number of people speeding on East Dakota freeways is reduced by 90 percent. The FBI asks the EDSP for real-time access to the information collected by the video cameras. The EDSP complies with this request. Three months later, the FBI uses this information to arrest five members of a terrorist organization.

Kantian

The analysis depends upon the expectation of privacy people should have. The existence of the cameras is public knowledge. If nobody is being "used," the action appears to be morally acceptable.

Act utilitarian

In this case the benefits seem to outweigh the harms. The actions of the East Dakota State Police are morally acceptable.

Rule utilitarian

The East Dakota State Police is using technology to increase the safety of the community. Its actions appear to be morally acceptable.

Social contract theory

How much privacy should a person have while operating a motor vehicle on a freeway? If a person has given up all privacy, then there seems to be nothing wrong with this action. If a person has a reasonable expectation of privacy, then the East Dakota State Police may have done something wrong if it secretly gave the FBI access to the information.

Scenario 4

You are the senior software engineer at a start-up company developing an exciting new product that will allow salespeople to generate and email sales quotes and customer invoices from their smart phones.

Your company's sales force has led a major corporation to believe your product will be available next week. Unfortunately, at this point the package still contains quite a few bugs. The leader of the testing group has reported that all of the known bugs appear to be minor, but it will take another month of testing for his team to be confident the product contains no catastrophic errors. Because of the fierce competition in the smart phone software industry, it is critical that your company be the "first to market." To the best of your knowledge, a well-established company will release a similar product in a few weeks. If its product appears first, your start-up company will probably go out of business.

Kantian

Releasing the software without informing the potential users of the possible bugs would be wrong. However, if the hospital staff were fully notified that the product was in beta test, a decision to release the product could be justified.

Act utilitarian

To do the analysis, we must examine the various courses of action and weigh, for each one, the potential benefits and harms to the patients, nurses, hospital, and members of the start-up company.

Rule utilitarian

As long as the company fully discloses the status of the product, it appears to be on safe ground.

Social contract theory

The purchaser of a product has a right to expect the manufacturer stands behind the quality of the product. In this case it would be wrong for the company to sell the product as if it were completely debugged and 100 percent reliable. On the other hand, the hospital might be willing to beta test the device if it could get a discounted price or if that would help the company certify its reliability. The company could begin shipping the device to hospitals that understood the current state of the software.