

Computer Ethics: Codes, Commandments, and Quandries

by Julie Van Camp
Professor of Philosophy
California State University, Long Beach

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Name a profession nowadays and it likely has proudly announced a Code of Professional Ethics – doctors, dentists, lawyers, professors, journalists, and, yes, computer experts. Efforts to raise the ethical standards of any profession might be expected to warm the hearts of professional philosophers -- a group lacking its own formal Code of Professional Ethics, strangely enough.

Surprise – these much-publicized rules are not the least bit reassuring to people who specialize in the study of ethics. While attention to ethics is certainly welcome, these ethical codes provide a too-easy cop-out, a way to neatly dispose of attention to nagging and pervasive problems. The typical professional code is little more than a checklist of rules that enables professionals of any stripe to give lip service to ethical behavior without engaging in continuing dialogue on ethical dilemmas. Neatly packaged commandments short-circuit development of the reasoning tools to work through ethical challenges meaningfully and with long-lasting impact on the actual behavior in any field.

Ethical behavior comes from an ability to reason through new problems as they arise continually in any profession. It grows from a continuing understanding of principles and how to apply them to new and varied situations which we cannot even imagine, let alone predict at the present time. Only with a reasoned and thoughtful response to ethical problems are people likely to behave ethically.

Parroting a simple list of rules, however well-intentioned, lulls people into thinking there are easy answers to ethical problems. Yet the more important the problem, the more difficult it is to work out solutions.

A few examples are in order. The Association for Computing Machinery boasts of a Code of Ethics consisting of 24 “moral imperatives” for members. The Association is to be applauded for the process of developing and publicizing the code, yet the guidelines themselves leave would-be adherents in the dark on what to do in actual ethical dilemmas, as do such Codes adopted by other professional associations.

For example, imperative 1.7 says that members should “respect the privacy of others.” This sounds entirely important and appropriate. In this privacy-paranoid era, especially given the enormous amount of data to which many computer professionals have access. But what should we do if the information to which we have access includes threats to inflict bodily harm or death on another person – do we have another moral obligation to violate the respect for privacy in order to alert those in danger? What if we discover evidence of fraudulent credentials in the confidential personnel files of a fellow employee? Does it matter if the fraud is mere puffery about graduating with honors or falsifying documentation about qualifications to be responsible for the health and safety of other workers? What if we discover evidence that elderly retirees

are being swindled by a financial advisor? The problem is that privacy rights are important in isolation but they are not absolute. When they can be overridden by other moral obligations is the tough part.

Try another. Responsibility 2.6 says that members should “honor contracts, agreements, and assigned responsibilities.” Good enough. But what if the assignment is to “borrow” as much as possible of a competitor’s ideas without getting the company into legal trouble? What if the agreement is to come up with a new and questionable way of reporting productivity that will encourage the public to invest more money in the firm’s shaky stock offerings? What if the contract is with a company which we now know obtained business through unethical or perhaps illegal behavior? Again, honoring agreements is important, but not absolute. When do overriding circumstances dictate that they be ignored?

How should these conflicting concerns be sorted out? Business schools and law schools are well-known for use of the case study method, in which students extract principles for use in sifting through complex issues. Ethical analysis also thrives with complex case study analysis, whether in a formal philosophy course in a college or university or in a professional retreat or conference where professional peers can work through tough cases together and learn from each other and from the process.

Case studies force us to confront a basic truth about ethical problems: they are never simple, with only one relevant principle that tells us what to do, as Professional Codes misleadingly imply. Rather, ethical problems deal mainly with conflicting and seemingly irreconcilable principles that must be evaluated, weighed, and balanced.

The case study method extracts meta-principles that help us carry out this reconciliation of conflicting principles. Professionals in any field need to realize that their Professional Codes are virtually worthless as a discrete checklist of rules, even though the rules might be a helpful first step in sorting through real cases. If professional conferences, meetings, and publications focus more on case study analysis and complexity and less on check-lists, perhaps some real ethical awareness would emerge that would actually assist professionals in working through the ethical dilemmas they see every day in their work environment.

What are these meta-principles? Alas, there is no agreement here either, but some broad approaches have emerged in western philosophy and religious ethical thought. They do not provide easy answers, but rather are tools or mechanisms which help us move through difficult ethical reasoning challenges.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant gave us several such meta-principles. Intimidating labels for his principles should not lead people to shy away from their usefulness. His Categorical Imperative tells us to ask, when faced with a behavior choice: what if everybody did that? Would I want everybody to follow this practice I am about to embark on? Would I want to “universalize” this behavior? This goal is sometimes likened to the old “Golden Rule”: do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Sounds simple, but it becomes an enormously valuable tool for sifting through complex dilemmas. The privacy of swindlers seems less sacrosanct if we consider that we might want everybody to “out” shady characters ripping off the elderly.

Another Kantian principle is sometimes called the Practical Imperative: always treat

persons as ends in themselves, never as a means to an end. Treat people with dignity and respect. Don't "use" people. Add this meta-principle to many ethical debates and the pieces start to fall into place. We might well conclude that the principle of honoring agreements should yield if it means manipulating profit numbers to exploit unsuspecting investors.

Others find that what is called Utilitarian reasoning works well as a meta-principle. Credited to philosophers Jeremy Bentham and J.S. Mill, Utilitarianism asks us to consider what behavior will create the greatest happiness for the greatest number. It's okay for us to include ourselves in that assessment of happiness, but we should include all others as well. Utilitarian reasoning might conclude that embarrassing a colleague by revealing private evidence of fake credentials is far outweighed by the greater happiness for dozens of co-workers in a safe workplace.

In struggling with ethics, extracting a variety of meta-principles that help us reason through dilemmas would constitute enormous progress from the check-list, right-answer approach of Professional Codes. This sort of reasoning is not easy, but nothing important ever is.