Professional Ethics

Outline

• Is software engineering a profession?
• Software engineering code of ethics
• Analysis of the code
• Case studies
• Whistleblowing
Introduction

• Definition of a Profession (informal)
  – High level of education
  – Practical experience
  – Decisions have impact

• Examples
  – Doctors
  – Lawyers

• We expect professionals to act for public good

Formal Characteristics of a Profession

• Initial professional education
• Accreditation
• Skills development
• Certification
• Licensing
• Professional development
• Code of ethics
• Professional society
Certified Public Accountants

• Bachelor’s degree
  – 150+ semester hours
  – 24+ hours of accounting-related classes

• Two years’ experience working under supervision of a CPA

• CPA exam

• To retain certification
  – Continuing education
  – Follow code of ethics

Software Engineers

• Certification and licensing not needed

• Without these, other characteristics are irrelevant:
  – No college education needed
  – No apprenticeship needed
  – No membership in professional society needed
  – No continuing education needed
Software Engineering Code: Preamble

- Historical context

- Software engineers have opportunities to do good or do harm

- Software engineers ought to be committed to doing good

- Eight principles identify key ethical relationships and obligations within these relationships

- Code should be seen as a whole, not a collection of parts

- Concern for the public interest is paramount
Analysis of Preamble

• No mechanical process for determining if an action is right or wrong

• Should not take an overly legalistic view of the Code
  – If Code doesn’t forbid something, that doesn’t mean it is morally acceptable
  – Judgment required

• Code reflects principles drawn from multiple ethical theories

Alternative List of Fundamental Principles

• Be impartial.
• Disclose information that others ought to know.
• Respect the rights of others.
• Treat others justly.
• Take responsibility for your actions and inactions.
• Take responsibility for the actions of those you supervise.
• Maintain your integrity.
• Continually improve your abilities.
• Share your knowledge, expertise, and values.
**Case: Child Pornography**

- Joe Green a system administrator
- Asked to install new software package on Chuck Dennis’ computer
- Green not authorized to read other people’s emails or personal files
- Green sees suspicious-looking file names
- He opens some of Dennis’ files and discovers child pornography
- What should he do?

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**Analysis**

- Most relevant principles
  - Be impartial
  - Respect the rights of others
  - Treat others justly
  - Maintain your integrity

**Case: Anti-Worm**

- Internet plagued by new worm that exploits hole in popular operating system
- Tim Smart creates anti-worm that exploits same security hole
- Tim’s anti-worm fixes PCs it infects. It also uses these PCs as launch pad to reach new PCs.
- Tim launches anti-worm, taking pains to keep it from being traced back to him.
- The anti-worm quickly spreads through Internet, infecting millions of computers
- System administrators around the world combat the anti-worm
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**Analysis**

- Most relevant principles
  - Continually improve your abilities.
  - Share your knowledge, expertise, and values.
  - Respect the rights of others.
  - Take responsibility for your actions and inactions.