Introduction

CS 391: Social and Ethical Issues in Computer Science

Introduction

• This course is about making decisions in the context of your work in technology.

• Computers play an important role in our world. With rapid technological change, technology-related fields are filled with important social, legal, and ethical issues.
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• As you work with technology, you will face many of these issues. You will have to make a decision about how to act.
• Our goal in this course: give you some tools to help you analyze situations and make decisions whose implications will affect other people.
• Decisions you make can impact thousands, millions, or even billions of people.

Introduction

• We will examine some pressing social, legal, and ethical issues related to computers and technology in our modern society.
• Topics include a subset of the following:
  • Software & hardware risks, hacking, accountability for software/hardware-related harm, governance & regulation, and whistleblowing
  • Privacy, data collection, surveillance
  • Artificial intelligence and algorithmic bias
  • Automation, labor, and work & wealth generation
  • Social media, online anonymity, conspiracy theories, fake news, free speech, censorship
  • Equity, power, diversity, and accessibility
  • Many more
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- Sometimes decisions related to these issues are extremely complex, involving many stakeholders and little existing precedent.
- We need to understand ethics to be able to make choices in such situations.

Ethics and Morality

- *Ethics* and *morality* are both concepts related to making decisions and behaving rightly in the world.
- These terms are often used interchangeably, but in this class, we want to distinguish between them.
- In particular, *morality* refers to one’s own personal principles regarding right and wrong behavior.
Ethics and Morality

• By contrast, *ethics* refers to the study of morality.

• Ethical study often results in sets of rules or guidelines for behaving rightly, e.g. a society’s laws, professional codes of conduct, religious principles, formal ethical frameworks (e.g. utilitarianism).
  • Generally, one’s own morals are drawn from many different sources like these.
  • Sometimes, one’s own morals can be in conflict with the ethics prescribed by a given source.
    • E.g., a defense lawyer’s morals may tell them that murder is absolutely wrong, but their professional ethical code may require them to defend to the best of their abilities a murderer who they know is guilty.

Ethics and Morality

In this course, we’ll examine several formal ethical frameworks, including:

• *Utilitarianism* – act in the way that produces the most good

• *Kantianism* – the categorical imperative: for an act to be right, it must follow from a rule that can be applied to all people without contradiction

• *Virtue theory* – emphasizes virtues of mind and character in action, e.g. courage, honesty, generosity, etc.

• *The social contract* – members of a group or society implicitly accept a contract of rules for behavior within the group or society
Discussions in this course

• This course will involve a lot of in-person and online discussion of topics that can be controversial.
• In general, you should adhere to these guidelines (adopted from Pam Van Londen) during class discussions:
  • Assume the best of others in the class and expect the best from them.
  • Make a personal commitment to learning about, understanding, and supporting your peers and instructor.
  • Think through a second time your comments before presenting them.
  • Never make derogatory comments toward another person in the class, including the instructor or assistants.
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Discussions in this course

• Do not make sexist, racist, homophobic, or victim-blaming comments at all.
• Disagree with ideas, but do not make personal attacks.
• Acknowledge the impact of sexism, racism, ethnocentrism, classism, heterosexism, ageism, and ableism on the lives of class members.
• Recognize and value the experiences, abilities, and knowledge each person brings to class. Value the diversity of the class.
• Pay close attention to what your classmates say. Ask clarifying questions, when appropriate. These questions are meant to probe and shed new light, not to minimize or devalue comments.
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Discussions in this course

• Be open to being challenged or confronted on your ideas or prejudices.
• Challenge others with the intent of facilitating growth. Do not demean or embarrass others.
• Encourage others to develop and share their ideas.
• Participate actively in the discussions, having completed the readings and thought about the issues.
• Be willing to change.

Discussions in this course

Part of your grade for the course will be based on your participation in our course discussions. Here are some rules of thumb for how to earn this part of your grade:

• Try to participate in the lecture discussion at least once per week.
  • This is not a hard and fast rule, just a guideline to help you understand how much I’d like you to participate.
• Contribute something meaningful and relevant to the discussion.
  • Just commenting “good point” or something like that isn’t super meaningful.
• Engage with your fellow students and the points they’re making.
• Cite sources when you can.
• Feel free to bring the discussion online using our course Canvas forum.