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Case Analysis on Professional Ethics

In Bill Sourour's "The Code I'm Still Ashamed Of", he tells readers about how coding has always been something that he's found interesting and enjoyed doing. Since the age of six years old, he's been writing code and from there has only moved up in the coding world. At age fifteen, Bill landed his first part-time job with his father, and by the age of twenty-one, he had landed his first full-time coding job. With this information, one could assume that not only does Bill love coding, but he is good at it as well. At this full-time job, Bill wrote code for a pharmaceutical company and due to it being in Canada, there were strict limits on how these companies could advertise prescription drugs directly to consumers. Bill oversaw coding the website for the company and was also asked to code a feature into the website that would prompt users to take a quiz and depending on what they answered they would be suggested a drug. The problem with this was that no matter what the users answered, they would all be pointed in the same direction toward one specific drug. Bill at the time saw no wrong in this as it wasn't illegal and was merely a marketing tactic until he discovered that a teenage girl who had taken the prescription that he coded the quiz for had killed herself. Shortly after hearing the news, Bill resigned from the company and preached that developers are the last line of defense against potentially dangerous and unethical practices. In this Case Analysis I will argue that Confucian shows us that the code was morally problematic because it disrupts harmony in the world and puts one's personal character and values to the test and that Sourour should have done things differently because there were signs of unethical practices to begin with.

In support of my argument, there are three Codes of Ethics. These codes of ethics belong to ACM, IEEE, and NSCPE. These three Codes of Ethics all serve a different field but are similar in nature as the overall focus is on the standards of professional ethics. The ACM (The Association for Computing Machinery) has a Code of Ethics that members must abide by. Some of the general moral imperatives that members must commit to are contributing to society and human well-being, avoiding harm to others, being honest and trustworthy, being fair, and acting not to discriminate. Just from these imperatives, we can already identify a few that Bill and his employers have gone against. Bill and his employers go against every single one of the moral imperatives mentioned above. In order, this is done by disrupting the well-being of society and humans. In relation, due to the code that Bill was ordered to write, someone died,

and this goes against the first two moral imperatives. The quiz that Bill coded was indeed dishonest and untrustworthy as the results of the quiz were the same no matter what you answered. Due to the quiz only having one outcome this was unfair and targeted only teenage girls so this could act as discrimination.

Like ACM, the IEEE (Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers) also has a Code of Ethics. Some of their commitments are to hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public, to avoid injury to others, to treat everyone fairly, and to not engage in acts of discrimination. These are all spot on with ACM as they share imperatives. What was said about Bill and his employers above also applies here to the IEEE's Code of Ethics. So far with the two Code of Ethics, we see that there is a common set of rules that in a sense, show common and ethical morality.

Just like ACM and IEEE, NSPE also has a Code of Ethics. NSPE is the National Society of Professional Engineers. Within their Code of Ethics, they emphasize the importance of engineering and make it well known that their members are held to the highest standards when it comes to professional ethics. NSPE states that engineers shall hold paramount the safety, health, and welfare of the public. In addition, Engineers shall disclose all known conflicts of interest which could influence their judgment or quality of work. Engineers should also avoid deceptive acts and be guided by the highest standards of honesty and integrity, and unethical/illegal practices should be reported. NSPE's Code of Ethics touches the most bases between the three and would be the perfect standard for the company that Bill worked for.

If Bill and the company that he worked for had followed any one of these three Code of Ethics, favorably NSPE's, I believe that the case at hand would be nonexistent. I say this because the quiz that Bill coded was indeed deceptive and was meant to trick users into being prescribed the drug no matter what they answered. The tool of Confucian emphasizes contextual moral choices and doing the right thing even if it is the wrong thing is a part of your duty. With Bill and the company abiding by any one of the Code of Ethics, this would prevent the company from giving the thumbs up on such a "marketing tactic" due to its deceptiveness and if Bill at any moment felt forced to do such a thing or even sensed that such act was about to be done he would be allowed to report it so that the respective people of the company can take action. We see that Bill resigned right after finding out what had happened, and this shows that he is not in support of such ethical ways which doubles down on one way of Confucianism and that is challenging someone with more power than you if you feel that something is immoral or unethical.

In Mary Armstrong's *"Confidentiality: A Comparison across the Professions of Medicine, Engineering, and Accounting"*, Armstrong talks about how a confidentiality breach can cause harm but it's different depending on the profession. One concept that Armstrong touched on specifically is the fact that the duty to the public's safety, health, and welfare is a higher duty than other mentioned duties. Armstrong's overall point is that ethics vary depending on the profession so while one may be a little more willing to follow unethical practice the other may value something completely different and play by the book. In this case, Bill's profession would

quite fit in any of these fields, but one thing can be said about the moral values of the field/organization. No matter the profession, workers and or members are almost always required to value fairness and integrity with little to no room for wiggle. So, with, Bill and the company that he worked for I'm sure we are aware of what is considered ethical and what isn't. I understand that Bill was in Canada and there are rules for how you can advertise prescription drugs, but everyone should know for the most part what's right and wrong along with knowing if something is ethical or not especially if you are working in the field.

Armstrong also feels that the breaching of one's confidentiality to protect the public interest is sometimes permissible and on occasion, required. I feel that this approach makes a distinction between circumstances in which a breach of client confidentiality is permissible and circumstances where a breach is a moral requirement. It becomes a moral requirement when it has the possibility to disrupt harmony and affect societal and human well-being/quality of life. The goal would be to identify a set of conditions that determine when a breach of client confidentiality is morally permissible and then to identify the set of additional conditions that make a breach a moral requirement.

Bill wouldn't necessarily relate to some of Armstrong's thoughts but what can be agreed upon is the overarching presence of Confucianism. Bill's actions prior to the death don't represent Confucianism but his telling the story today does. Bill is an advocate of doing what is right regardless of what authority may order you to do. Even if it is your duty to do these things you can remain moral and act ethically in such situations. As for Armstrong, she understands that confidentiality is something that everyone should be entitled to but also understands that there are times when a breach in confidentiality may be what's right for everyone, and by everyone, this means the well-being of others and quality of life. In this case, Bill was only doing what he was told without even looking within and asking himself if this was unethical or immoral at all. Bill could've acted in Confucianism by looking within when having a conversation with his supervisor about the results of the quiz and expressing how he felt about doing such a thing.

Overall, Confucianism is all about following your path, doing unto others as you would want to be done unto you, understanding your role, and reflecting on it so that others can act morally in their role as well. This case made me think that it really could have been looked at in many ways because what Bill did wasn't wrong as he was just doing his job but for the sake of the Confucian tool, he could've certainly done things differently. One thought that I have now is what could have happened if Bill had been fully aware of the unethical practice and had taken action to prevent it. Bill's actions after the event are what show his true morality and are what essentially defines Confucianism, if he had questioned his supervisor in that very moment when they asked him to write the code for that quiz Bill would have acted according to the Code of Ethics and in accordance with Confucianism.

