

Case Study: Zero Days

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PHIL 355E: Cybersecurity Ethics

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November 16th, 2025

Introduction

In this essay, I will apply deontological ethics to an ethical challenge faced by Eric Chien, one of Symantec's lead security researchers, in the documentary *Zero Days*. Chien uncovers sensitive evidence linking the Stuxnet worm to U.S. Israel state operations, which puts him in a difficult position: should he publicly reveal technical information that governments clearly want hidden, or should he stay silent despite the global risk the malware poses? I argue that, according to deontological ethics, Chien had a duty to disclose Stuxnet's details once it began spreading uncontrollably, because withholding that information would treat the global public as a means rather than as mindful people deserving the truth. In what follows, I will explain deontological ethics, describe Chien's situation in *Zero Days*, apply the theory to his case, and show what the theory says he should have done.

Description of the Normative Ethical Theory: Deontology

Deontology is an ethical theory centered on duties, rules, and moral principles, not outcomes. The core idea comes from Immanuel Kant's claim that the right action is the one done from duty and in accordance with the categorical imperative. One major formulation of these imperative states is that you should only act on principles that could be willed as universal laws, in other words, rules that everyone could consistently follow. Another key factor requires treating all individuals as ends in themselves, never as tools for someone else's goals. Under deontology, consequences, whether positive or negative, do not determine the morality of the action. Instead, what matters is whether an action respects the mind, follows a morally sound rule, and upholds one's duty. This framework encourages individuals to follow principles that would still make sense if everyone acted the same way.

Description of the situation from Zero Days

In Zero Days, Eric Chien plays a key role in uncovering the true nature and origin of Stuxnet. As a cybersecurity researcher at Symantec, he identifies that the malware is far more advanced than typical criminal hacks and realizes it is certainly a state sponsored cyber weapon. The deeper he investigates, the more he recognizes the political sensitivity of the findings. Governments refuse to acknowledge Stuxnet's existence though it has escaped the Iranian nuclear facility and is now spreading across the world. Chien faces a dilemma, releasing his findings helps protect global infrastructure and informs the public about a major cyber threat, but it also risks exposing classified operations, straining diplomatic relations, and drawing government backlash. Remaining silent keeps him safe and aligns with powerful governments' wish for secrecy, but silence also leaves critical systems vulnerable and keeps ordinary people uninformed about a weapon now loose in the wild. His choice is not only technical. It is moral.

Applying Deontology to Zero Days

From a deontological perspective, Chien must evaluate his duties, not the fallout. First, he has a professional duty to protect users, inform the public about threats, and act with integrity as a cybersecurity expert. As a field, cybersecurity only functions if researchers are honest about threats, share knowledge, and refuse to hide dangers that can harm the public. A rule like “security researchers should reveal malware that endangers civilians” is something that could be universalized without contradiction.

At the same time, Chien faces pressure, implicit or explicit, to stay quiet because the malware is tied to intelligence operations. But a rule like “researchers should hide the truth whenever a government prefers secrecy” cannot be universalized. If everyone followed that rule, cybersecurity would collapse into political manipulation, and the public would lose their choice.

Keeping Stuxnet secret would treat the global population to geopolitical ends, violating the deontological principle that individuals must be treated as ends in themselves.

So, even though disclosure might anger powerful governments or complicate diplomatic tensions, duty-based ethics says that Chien's obligation is to tell the truth about a weapon that has already escaped containment. The morality of his actions hinges on respecting global autonomy and following a rule that could be universalized, not on predicting how governments will react.

What Eric Chien should have done instead

According to deontology, Chien should prioritize honest disclosure over political pressure. This means that he should officially release accurate, technical details of Stuxnet once he confirms it is no longer contained and is affecting global systems. His duty as a cybersecurity professional outweighs government secrecy demands because those demands are grounded in strategic interests, not moral principles.

If Chien were to stay silent, he would be following a principle that cannot be universalized that researchers should conceal information about harmful cyberweapons when governments prefer it. Such a rule undermines the will of those who rely on him to provide a transparent, accurate threat of intelligence. The duty-based alternative is clear, follows the principle of truthfulness and respect for persons, even when the state prefers silence. Under this view, his responsibility is to warn the public, support remediation efforts, and communicate openly with the security community.

Conclusion

In summary, applying deontological ethics to Eric Chien's dilemma in Zero Days shows that his duty lies in transparent disclosure. A rule requiring researchers to reveal dangerous

malware could be universalized, and it respects global morals by giving people the information they need to protect themselves. In contrast, a rule requiring silence for the sake of government secrecy fails the deontological test because it treats the public for geopolitical ends. Therefore, according to deontology, Chien's morally correct course of action is to act from duty, disclose the truth about Stuxnet, and uphold the ethical responsibilities of his profession.

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