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Case Analysis on Professional Ethics

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03/21/2021

Many times, when we are working, we tend to overlook simple factors such as honesty, morality, or plain common courtesy. This can be seen in all professions. I once worked in a correction facility where we were required to provide not only security to the public from the inmates on the inside, but also to the inmates themselves. Often, officers would simply turn the “blind-eye” on situations where inmates were harming other inmates because...they were inmates. It was not morally right, but it was what happened. The officers were just doing what they thought was their job, they had forgotten that their job included protecting the inmates from other inmates as well. This lack of morality can be seen in the article titled “The Code I’m Still Ashamed Of” by Bill Sourour. Bill was simply “doing his job”. Bill was not concerned with the effects it would have to trick the young girls into taking the drug the quiz results lead them to, because there were no other options. Bill could have told the client that he did not feel comfortable tricking the young girls. This may have cost Bill the contract with the client, but at least he would not have written a code that would haunt him for all his days. In this Case Analysis I will argue that consequentialism shows us that the code was morally problematic because the result of the actions Sourour took were wrong because the outcome was bad, and that Sourour should have acted differently because the collateral damage of his actions indirectly leads to the suicide deaths of several young girls.

First, I will discuss the ACM code of ethics. In section 1.2 of the ACM code of ethics titled “Avoid Harm to Others” the code states that “Harm” can not only mean injury, but also negative consequences. We can certainly see that Sourour’s lack of morality in writing his code

to trick young women into taking a specific drug that lead to their suicidal thoughts and sometimes actions, was a violation of the ACM's code of ethics. Although his code did not directly affect these women physically, nor did the code itself cause the "harm", it did indirectly steer the women to a certain drug that inevitably had side effects that were not considered beforehand in the development of the code. The ACM code section even goes on the state, "Well-intended actions, including those that accomplish assigned duties, may lead to harm unexpectedly. In such an event the responsible person or persons are obligated to undo or mitigate the negative consequences as much as possible. One way to avoid unintentional harm is to carefully consider potential impacts on all those affected by decisions made during design and implementation." (OAD) Obviously Sourour's code was developed and implemented without using the ACM's code of ethics and did indeed violate this section by accomplishing goals for the job, but failing to make certain that no one would be negatively affected unexpectedly.

We can look at the ethics tool of consequentialism to gain a more complete understanding of this concept. As is implied in the name, consequentialism is basically the idea that a person's actions always have consequences. Consequences fall under two categories, right and wrong. If a person's actions result in a positive outcome than the actions would be considered appropriate or just. However, if a person's actions were to have a negative outcome, their actions would be considered inappropriate or unethical. Sourour fails to use this simple tool when creating his code. He is only concerned with getting the job done. He even states how he was asked by his project manager about his code directing the quiz takers to the one drug no matter what they answer on the quiz, aside for allergies, and he simply responded, "Yes. That is what the requirements say to do. Everything leads to the client's drug." This should have been a defining moment for him. He should have used this feedback to take a step back and look at this

from the prospective of consequentialism. He could have asked himself, what harm could come from directing every user that takes the quiz to the client's drug. Even if he would have decided to continue, he should have at least done some research on the side effects of the drug his code was directing these people to. This would have shown him that his actions could have negative connotations and he could have chosen to make the right choices in his code to not trick the people taking the quiz. This may not have set well with the client, but it would have been in compliance with the ACM code of ethics, and the right thing to do morally.

Next, we look at an article by Mary Beth Armstrong titled "Confidentiality: A Comparison Across the Professions of Medicine, Engineering and Accounting." In this, Armstrong mentions "whistleblowers" and when it is important for someone to speak up and become a whistleblower. We can see a prime example of when someone should become a whistleblower in Sourour's article. Sourour had an opportunity to make the decision to whistleblow about the client's request that everything lead to the client's drug. He knew it was the wrong thing to do, and again, even his project manager brought to his attention that the code had an ethical flaw to it. Sourour choose to continue with the code anyway. Sourour was not using the ethical code of consequentialism when thinking about how his actions would affect the end user. Instead, Sourour was simply thinking about how the client wanted the end-product to act. He completely overlooked the consequences that could arise from his code.

Armstrong states that whistleblowing is a "valid means of last resort to discharge a duty to protect the public from harm if 1) the treat is imminent and serious, 2) existing avenues for change within the organization have been exhausted, and 3) the whistleblower makes his/her accusations openly so those criticized have the opportunity to defend themselves." (Armstrong, 1994) Sourour would have seen that the threat was "imminent and serious" if he would have

done his due diligence and researched the side effects of the drug. He would have also been able to voice his concerns with his project manager to see if there was a way to both accomplish the task at hand and please the client, as well as making his code act in accordance with ethical standards. Using consequentialism as an ethical tool would have opened Sourour's eyes to what he was doing with his code and possibly saved him the regret he mentions in his article.

As a developer, Sourour has a moral responsibility to keep his code operating in the realm of ethics. Sourour should have used consequentialism to determine to what extent he was willing to go with his code. Armstrong mentions in her article a way to determine when it is ok to breach confidentiality. This same method could have been used by Sourour to weigh the probability of harm to the magnitude of harm. In this case the magnitude of harm would have thrown up red flags due to the side effects of the drug his code was leading people to being suicidal thoughts and actions. Using consequentialism, the consequences of his actions would have made the code unusable from a moral and ethical standpoint. At the point of realizing this, Sourour could have taken it on himself to bring this to the attention of his project manager. We can look at Armstrong's article to see steps in going public as a whistleblower. If the project manager did nothing, or advised Sourour to continue anyway, this would have been the point when Sourour would go to the next step of going public as a whistleblower. Again, this would have required Sourour to look at the project from a consequentialism viewpoint and see the consequences of his actions. Sourour would have had to decide then if his code would cause senseless harm in the end and what actions he could take to limit this harm.

In conclusion, Sourour wrote a code that not only violated ethical code, but also moral code. He did not look at the ramifications of what could possibly happen when implementing code that, no matter what, ensured the outcome always lead an end user to being steered towards

a drug with dangerous side effects. He was not even aware of the side effects until his code was implemented. Sourour should have researched the drug and determined if his code would have beneficial or harmful consequences. If Sourour would have taken advantage of the use of the ethical tool of consequentialism he could have seen that his code had very harmful consequences and the actions he took from there may have saved himself a lot of regret, and possibly saved someone's life as well. Using consequentialism could have ensured that he did not create code that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

Works Cited

Armstrong, M. B. (1994, March 1). Digital Georgetown Home.

<https://repository.library.georgetown.edu/handle/10822/872736>.

The Code affirms an obligation of computing professionals to use their skills for the benefit of society. Code of Ethics. (0AD). <https://www.acm.org/code-of-ethics>.