

Kantian Ethics and Tim Kendall in *The Social Dilemma*

Introduction

In this essay, I will apply Kantian ethics to an ethical challenge faced by Tim Kendall, which was highlighted by the film *The Social Dilemma*. Tim Kendall was originally the director of monetization at Facebook. He later moved on to become the president of Pinterest. In the film *The Social Dilemma*, Tim Kendall describes how he became increasingly aware of the addictive and potentially harmful nature of persuasive social media design. This is significant because he himself was helping grow this potentially harmful platform. The ethical challenge that Tim Kendall faces is whether it is morally acceptable to design and promote technology that manipulates users' attention for profit. I argue that, according to Kantian ethics, Kendall has a duty to reform or at least reject persuasive technology practices that treat users as a means to an end, corporate profit. To further support this argument, I will explain the key points of Kantian ethics, describe Kendall's ethical challenge, and show why Kant's theory can resolve Kendall's ethical dilemma.

Kantian Ethics

Kantianism or Kantian ethics is a deontological moral theory created by Immanuel Kant. Kantian ethics focuses on duties and moral rules/laws. The core principle of Kantian ethics is the existence of categorical imperatives. A categorical imperative is essentially an unconditional rule that always applies, regardless of the circumstances. This enables us to know what is always good without qualification. Or in more actionable terms, act only on moral rules that you can envision everyone else following without the creation of a contradiction. Kantian ethics also

argues that we should always treat humanity as an end and never as a means to an end. This means that everyone should be treated with respect for their rationality and autonomy. To treat someone as a means is to use them for your own purposes without respecting their rationality or autonomy. In the context of Kantian ethics, moral actions are those performed out of respect for people as ends and out of duty, not for profit or self-interest.

Applying Kantian ethics

Applying Kantian ethics to Tim Kendall's ethical challenges creates the key question of whether persuasive and addictive design treats users as ends in themselves or merely as means to profit. From watching the film *The Social Dilemma*, I can come to the conclusion that social media platforms that intentionally exploit unconscious psychological vulnerabilities to maximize potential profit via increased engagement treat users as a means to corporate profit. Furthermore, we must ask if all companies adopted the same mindset of "Create a system that manipulates users"; would it undermine the users' autonomy and rationality? It would because their attention would be constantly exploited. Manipulating users without their consent clearly treats them as a means. For all of these reasons Kantian ethics would criticize the intentional design of addictive systems for profit.

Resolution

According to Kantian ethics, Kendall should make an effort to reject business practices that manipulate users' autonomy and rationality for the sake of profit. He has a duty to respect the users as ends in themselves with autonomy, not to exploit their unconscious psychological tendencies. This requires going out of his way to advocate for changes that increase user well-being and informed choice over exploitative engagement metrics. A Kantian resolution would

include things like promoting transparency, limiting features that are addictive, and possibly even restructuring business models to depend less on maximizing a user's attention at all costs.

Conclusion

The ethical challenge that Tim Kendall faced can be evaluated using Kantian ethics. Kant's theory states acting according to categorical imperatives and respecting people as ends in themselves are crucial. Due to persuasive and addictive social media design treating users solely as a means for profit, it violates Kantian ethics. Hence, according to Kantian ethics, Kendall has a moral duty to oppose and/or reform such business practices. Kant's theory provides a resolution: profit cannot justify manipulating people.

References

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