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Case analysis 4

In *“The Code I’m Still Ashamed Of,”* Bill Sourour reflects on a project where he was hired to build an online quiz for a pharmaceutical company. The quiz was designed to guide users toward a specific drug by presenting itself as a helpful diagnostic tool. At the time, Sourour believed he was contributing to something positive, since the quiz appeared to help people better understand their health. However, he later realized that the quiz was part of a larger system that misled users and promoted a drug without properly disclosing its risks. The company had intentionally designed the experience in a way that influenced people’s decisions while hiding important information. This left Sourour feeling responsible, even though he had no knowledge of the company’s full intentions when he wrote the code. This situation raises important questions about responsibility, honesty, and the role of professionals in technology. In this Case Analysis, I will argue that Kantian deontology shows that the code was morally wrong because it involved deception and treated users as a means to an end, and that Sourour should not have acted differently at the time because he lacked the necessary knowledge to make a fully informed moral decision.

Professional codes of ethics, such as those from the National Society of Professional Engineers and the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, are built around the idea that professionals have a duty to protect the public and act with honesty. One of the central principles in these codes is that engineers and developers must prioritize the safety, health, and welfare of

the public above all else. This is not optional. It is a basic requirement of the profession. Another key idea is honesty and transparency, meaning professionals should avoid deceptive acts and communicate truthfully about the systems they create. When we apply these principles to Sourour's situation, it becomes clear that the pharmaceutical company failed to meet these standards. The quiz was designed in a way that gave users the impression they were receiving neutral or helpful information, when in reality it was guiding them toward a specific outcome. This is a form of deception. Even if the drug had some benefits, the way it was promoted violated the duty to be honest. From a Kantian perspective, this is a major issue because deception cannot be universalized. If every company misled users in this way, trust in digital systems would completely break down. Kantian deontology also emphasizes that people must be treated as ends in themselves, not as tools. The company clearly violated this principle. Users were not respected as individuals capable of making informed decisions. Instead, they were manipulated into choosing a product. Their autonomy was ignored in favor of the company's goals. This directly conflicts with the idea that individuals deserve respect and should not be used as a means to an end. The company also failed in its duty toward Sourour. By not sharing critical information about the purpose of the quiz and the risks of the drug, they prevented him from making an informed decision about his work. In a Kantian framework, this is another form of using someone as a means. Sourour was unknowingly contributing to a system he might not have agreed with if he had known the full truth. This lack of transparency violates the duty of honesty not just toward consumers, but within professional relationships as well.

Sourour's role, however, needs to be understood differently. According to Kantian ethics, moral responsibility depends on intention and knowledge. At the time, Sourour believed he was building a helpful tool. He did not intend to deceive anyone or cause harm. Because of this, his

actions do not carry the same level of moral blame. He was acting in good faith based on the information he had. The real failure lies with the company, which had full knowledge and still chose to act in a deceptive way. If the company had followed its ethical duties, the situation would have been very different. They should have been transparent about the purpose of the quiz and ensured that users were given accurate and complete information. They also should have informed Sourour about the full context of the project so he could decide whether he wanted to be involved. These steps would have respected both users and employees as individuals, rather than treating them as tools.

Mary Beth Armstrong's discussion of confidentiality and professional responsibility adds another layer to this situation. She explains that duties within a profession are shaped by shared responsibility and trust. Professionals rely on one another to act ethically, and this requires open communication and honesty. When information is withheld, it breaks that trust and weakens the ability of individuals to fulfill their roles properly.

In Sourour's case, this breakdown of shared responsibility is clear. The pharmaceutical company had access to important information about the drug and its potential effects, but they did not share that information with him. This prevented him from fully understanding the impact of his work. Armstrong's framework shows that responsibility is not just about individual actions, but about how information and duties are distributed within a group. When one part of the group withholds information, it creates an imbalance that leads to ethical failure.

From a Kantian perspective, this failure is even more serious. By withholding information, the company denied Sourour the ability to act as a rational decision-maker. Kantian ethics places a strong emphasis on autonomy, which requires access to relevant information.

Without that, a person cannot truly choose their actions. This means the company did not just fail professionally, but morally, because it prevented Sourour from exercising his own moral judgment. Armstrong also highlights that duties are connected to the purpose they serve. In this case, the purpose of the work should have been to provide accurate and helpful information to users. Instead, the purpose was shifted toward influencing behavior in a way that benefited the company. This change in purpose undermines the ethical foundation of the work. From a Kantian standpoint, this is unacceptable because it replaces respect for individuals with a focus on outcomes and profit. Another important point is that shared responsibility does not mean equal blame. While Sourour was part of the project, his role was limited by the information he was given. The company, on the other hand, had full control and understanding of the situation. This means they carry the majority of the moral responsibility. However, Armstrong's ideas also suggest that professionals should be aware of the broader impact of their work. While Sourour did not act wrongly at the time, this situation shows the importance of asking questions and seeking clarity when working on projects that affect others. If we combine Armstrong's framework with Kantian ethics, the solution becomes clear. The company should have ensured transparency and shared all relevant information with their team. This would have allowed everyone involved to act responsibly and in line with ethical standards. It also would have protected users from being misled. By failing to do this, the company created a system that was not only unprofessional but morally wrong.

To wrap this up, this case shows how ethical failures in technology are often tied to deeper issues of honesty, responsibility, and respect. The pharmaceutical company created a system that misled users and failed to share important information, which violated both professional codes of ethics and the principles of Kantian deontology. By treating users and Sourour as means to an end, the

company acted in a way that cannot be morally justified. At the same time, Sourour's situation highlights the complexity of responsibility. While he played a role in building the quiz, his lack of knowledge means he is not morally at fault in the same way. However, his reflection shows the importance of being aware of how one's work can affect others. Some might argue that it is unrealistic to expect full transparency in every situation, especially in business. However, accepting that argument would mean accepting deception as normal, which would undermine trust in professional work. In the end, ethical responsibility requires more than just following instructions. It requires respecting others and making sure that what we create does not harm them.