

Case Study 1 - The Social Dilemma

PHILL 355E

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## **Introduction**

In this paper, I will be applying Kantian Ethics to Tristan Harris. He is one of the people featured in the movie The Social Dilemma (2020). Harris worked at Google as a design ethicist and helped form an algorithm and create products that were intended to keep people hooked and manipulate their behavior for revenue. Harris's ethical dilemma stems from whether he should remain quiet to protect his career, or speak up against the system because it is causing harm to users. I will be arguing using Kant's Ethical Theory that Harris has a moral duty and should act with integrity and honesty by speaking up to protect people's autonomy over profits. In this essay I will be breaking down what Kantian are, explain Harris' situation, and apply the theory to his dilemma. This will show Kant's principles and what Harris should do.

## **Kantian Ethics**

Kantian ethics is about doing the right thing because it is your duty and the right thing to do. Not because it benefits you, but because it focuses on the intention and not the outcome. Kant believed that all good action must follow a process. This means doing something only if you want everyone else to act that way too. Another key ideal is to treat others not as tools to reach a goal, but as a mutual respect with each other. For Kant, morality is based upon having good will and good intentions. Doing what is right even when the task may be difficult or unpopular.

## **Tristan's Ethical Dilemma**

In The Social Dilemma, Tristan's conflict begins to emerge when he realizes tech companies design and create their platforms to keep users hooked. This means through algorithms, targeted ads, data collection, and notifications which are designed to exploit human psychology. Tristan starts to understand how these creations are causing generations of people to become addicted, polarized, and anxious. The rise of the term "iGeneration and iPad kids." Tristan's dilemma is him deciding to either stay silent to

protect his job and career or go against the system. Staying silent would go against his own personal values, but it's risky going against a company as large as Google. Think tension between profit and ethics.

### **Applying Kant's Ethics**

Through a Kantian lens, I believe Harris' situation is pretty straightforward and clear. Innovating technologies and profit comes at cost. This violates the moral rule of treating people as ends and not means. These creations treat humans as numbers to a mathematical formula instead of respecting their values, life, and as individuals Kantian ethics would also say that even though the company benefits it is still inherently wrong because it conflicts with the right of human freedom. Harris's decision to speak out will hurt his long term standing in the tech industry, but he is acting morally and doing what's right even though it is not convenient. Harris is right to go against the norm, because if everyone were to manipulate for personal gain the social construct and society would fall apart. It's important for as many people to speak out Harris alone isn't enough to create a change going against the mainstream flow.

### **Resolution**

According to Kantian ethics the correct and only ethical move for Harris is him needing to act out of principle. This would mean he would have to reject the manipulative design and push forward an agenda for transparency and honesty about how the tech industry is harming the public. This agenda isn't just an overnight fix, but one that sets a spark and allows the pathway for others to speak up. It's about intent and duty. Harris' choices reflect Kant's "good will" saying because it is just the right thing to do.

### **Conclusion**

Tristan Harris' situation in The Social Dilemma falls perfectly into the Kantian framework. The ethical challenges he faces by choosing between loyalty to his company Google, or loyalty to her moral beliefs. This tests whether or not he will act from duty or through self-interest. Kant says "the moral path to respect people's autonomy and reject systems that treat them as objects." Meaning it not about what you gain but who you are as a person especially when no one is watching.