

Analyzing Kant's Ethical Perspective Related to Vibe Coding in "Tea" App Data Breach.

Abstract: This case study examines the ethical implications associated with the use of vibe coding when designing the "Tea" App, which provides users advice regarding dating and networking. Vibe coding uses AI technology to generate quickly code through an informal/automatic process, which produces systems that are susceptible to exploitation. The "Tea" App data breach occurred in July 2025, when public storage space hosting information about nearly 72,000 users' private images, self-identified verified government issued identification, and conversations with other users were exposed to the public; thereby raising questions regarding what is ethically correct for system designers dealing with this type of incident. My position on this question is that according to Kantian theory developers have a moral obligation (a "categorical imperative") to respect the autonomy of their users by building systems that only consider them as users rather than as a tool for financial gain and to establish comprehensive security measures to mitigate this issue. What I will do in the following section is outline the principal elements of Kant's Ethics, discuss the issue of "vibe coding" and the moral problem that arises in the T.E.A. case, employ the Ethical Theory of Kant to the T.E.A. situation, and provide an outline for the developer's actions that were necessary to address the ethical dilemma.

The Normative Ethical Theory Defined

Kant's Ethics is a form of Deontological Ethics, with an emphasis on obligation and duty; adherence to moral principles, and the recognition of others as human beings, and treating all people with respect and decency, rather than judging actions solely based upon consequences. At the very centre of Kant's Ethics is what he calls the "Categorical Imperative", which he gives two main formulations for application. The first formulation serves as the basis for how one ought to act and is described as follows: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law". Therefore, the way in which one behaves, with respect to all others, will always be based upon a principle that every person can follow without any contradiction. Secondly, when one considers another (or even himself) as a human being, he/she should never be treated merely as a tool or means to an end, but rather as an end to himself/herself, and thus possess the same dignity and autonomy that would be afforded by any other human. With this respect also comes the obligation to avoid misleading, coercing or taking advantage of rational beings. Kant believed that the intention behind an individual's conduct determines its moral status – thus, actions can

be 'moral' because they are motivated by a sense of obligation to do something (what Kant refers to as 'duty'), rather than an inclination towards profit/self-interest. This unduly contrasts with most consequentialist theories (which would classify all actions as being either 'right' or 'wrong', depending on their utility), and is why Quinn feels that it is a workable ethical theory: it has clear, absolute moral guidelines which provide fairness/respect when faced with difficult situations (such as in the field of Information Technology, where development and use often create substantial discrepancies in the use of power).

The problem that we are experiencing with vibe coding is something that has been created by the proliferation of generative AI tools such as ChatGPT, which allow developers to create code based on vague, high-level ideas or "vibes" as opposed to more complicated specification requirements. This allows for quicker development times and makes development easier for people without extensive programming knowledge but at the same time creates a high risk that many defects (for example, insecure configurations) may be included in the code because of shortcuts taken by the developer in implementing AI-generated code. An example of this would be seen in the Tea app, which experienced a catastrophic data breach during July 2025 due to this issue. The Tea app was designed to be a secure platform where women could share their experiences and warnings about their dating experiences, including the personal risks associated with those experiences. However, a vulnerability in the code of the app led to women's images being stored in a public Firebase bucket with no means of protecting them (e.g., no password protection or access control). The use of AI-generated code likely led to the failure to recognize this significant security flaw. As a result, hackers exploited this vulnerability and were able to leak the details of more than 72,000 images to sites such as 4chan, including more than 13,000 selfies that contained government identification. These events exposed users to the possibility of identity theft, harassment, and dangerous situations in the real world, especially for users who shared sensitive information about themselves and their experiences on the app. While there may be valid reasons for a developer or company to want to quickly develop a product, the ethics of speed and convenience should never override the obligation of the developer and/or company to ensure that the privacy of individuals who are at greatest risk of being harmed is protected. In applying Kant's ethical theory to the issue of "vibe coding" in the Tea App, we evaluate the behaviour of the Tea developers through the lens of the categorical imperative. The first factor we need to take into account is the underlying "maxim" that justifies "vibe coding". To put it succinctly, the maxim behind "vibe coding" states "I will use AI generated code without a thorough security vetting process to save time and resources." If we were to universally adopt that maxim, we would create a world where no software development would have a

focus on security; consequently, that would ultimately create identical software technical breaches in virtually all applications that would inevitably lead to the total breakdown of trust in technology. Therefore, that would be a logical contradiction because applications like the Tea App were created to provide users with “safe” and “reliable” services. Furthermore, "vibe coding" violates the second formulation of the categorical imperative because it treats users as means (tools) instead of as ends (people). In the case of the Tea App, users provided their personal information to developers under the presumption that their information was private. However, by relying on AI code that developers did not properly vet for security, the users were put at risk to achieve a commercial advantage by quickly marketing the Tea App. By taking that action, tea developers have violated the autonomy of users who gave their consent based on the implied security measures of the developers to allow the developers to use their information. Therefore, developers treated users as tools that were instrumental in developing the Tea App and gaining a commercial advantage and not as people. According to Kantian ethics, the Tea app developers had a categorical duty to follow comprehensive security reviews regardless of time pressure. Even though they were faced with a lot of time constraints, they should have used manual code auditing and penetration testing to ensure that all Firebase buckets were private by default protected through authentication. The reason that this is important is that by treating artificial intelligence (AI) as a tool to assist rather than as a replacement for human overseers, this allows for all Firebase buckets to be protected properly. Additionally, the company must invest in educating their developers on the ethical responsibilities associated with their duties versus their inclinations toward profit. After the breach, under Kantian ethics, the company has a duty to be accountable by notifying affected users and providing compensation for any harm that was done to restore their autonomy as a result of the company's actions. Ultimately, using a Kantian approach to the ethical issues raised within the case study regarding the Tea application, Security should be treated as a moral absolute that cannot be negotiated in any way. By treating Security as a moral absolute, we can create creativity and innovation, with a Responsibility toward the Human Being.

Conclusion

The ethical issue of vibe coding in connection with the data breach of Tea, which allowed the private information of seventy-two thousand customers to be misused, could be addressed by the use of Kantian ethics. When considering the designers of Tea, they should apply the categorical imperative to avoid using users as instruments to achieve the desired result and instead create an obligation of respect and safety for users. Designers of technology should be focused on creating technology for the benefit of people and treating people with professionalism, rather than relying on casual forms of artificial intelligence. The premise of Kantian ethics is to base moral decisions on duty

rather than convenience; as such, we would avoid the above-mentioned harm from generative artificial intelligence.