

# An Ethical Turn in the Digital Industry?

Gilles Dowek

What is digital ethics?

# What is digital ethics

The development of informatics (computer science, data science, digital technologies...) gives us an immense capacity

We can use this capacity for doing **good** or for doing **evil**  
The same image recognition algorithms are used for medical imaging and mass surveillance

Ethics is the quest of an answer to the question **How can I use this capacity for doing good?**

# The concepts of ethics

- ▶ Rules and consequences

You ought to give a coin to a beggar because a (personal or collective) rule says so

You ought to give a coin to a beggar because he will starve otherwise

Discuss rules (from a code of conduct to a European law)

Ask yourself who is going to use the piece of software you are developing

- ▶ Values

Transparency, freedom of speech, benevolence, respect...

Ask yourself what your values are and whether your actions (writing code, collecting data...) realize these values

# The concepts of ethics

- ▶ Person (ethics of care)

Ethics is not just about abstract concepts (rules, state of affairs, values) but also about people

How to fight hate speech on social media? Understand that the abused people are people like you. Talk to them.

Condemn the abusers to hug their victims.

## Doing good is not always easy (1)

Moral dilemma: your values include : (1) **freedom of speech** and (2) **the respect for victims of a crime against humanity**

You moderating a web platform where some people glorify a genocide. Two options:

- ▶ let them do (and realize: freedom of speech)
- ▶ remove these messages (and realize: respect for the victims of a crime against humanity)

No good way to act: find a compromise

Intercultural ethics: often (not always) people have the same values, but not the same value hierarchy

(1) Recognize you share the same values and you are both facing the same dilemma.

(2) Do one step in the direction of the other.

## Doing good is not always easy (2)

A hospital decides to share all its medical files with a research lab

Sharing these files helps **medical research**

But it jeopardizes the patients' **privacy**

A solution: **anonymize** the files

But removing the last name of the patients is not enough

Wolfgang Amadeus \*\*\* (Salzburg, 1756 - Vienna, 1791), composer

How (and to which extent) can we anonymize a file? **A research problem**

An Ethical Turn in the Digital Industry?

# What is a turn?

In the history of the digital industry

- ▶ Some companies completely **mastered** a technology (and reached a monopoly)
- ▶ But a new technology **emerged**
- ▶ They saw it, but could not **adapt**, and lost their leadership to another company

Examples:

- IBM mastered hardware technology, but could not adapt to the emergence of software
- Microsoft mastered software technology (os...), but could not adapt to the emergence of the Web
- Google mastered (asymmetric, one-to-many) Web, but could not adapt to the emergence of the symmetric Web (social media...)
- ...

# What is next?

Difficult to tell

But we can answer a simpler question: **what is wrong** in the current situation? (and what makes users unhappy?)

- ▶ A social media business model based on the selling of the user's privacy
- ▶ hate speech
- ▶ on-line accusation without proof (revenge rather than justice)
- ▶ fake news

All these are ethical questions: privacy, peace, justice, truth

May be (remember we are not prophets)

- ▶ the emerging technology is ethics
- ▶ the current leaders will not manage to adapt (empirical fact)
- ▶ and new leaders respecting **privacy**, **peace**, **justice**, and **truth** will emerge

# Ethics and innovation

Ethics restricts innovation

If ethics is the next turn then the exact opposite:

**Ethics is a necessary condition to innovation**