

A Comment on the Ethic Theory in Software Engineering

Wiley (2000) attempted to classify all code items by analyzing the code of ethics for five organizations. The following items are common among most of the ethic codes:

- “ . Obligation to the society
- . Obligation to employers
- , Obligation to clients
- . Obligation to professional organization
- . Obligation to the profession
“

Quote from the WordNet 2.0 which provides the following definition of ethic

- “ 1. ethic, moral principle, value system, value orientation—(the principles of right and wrong that are accepted by an individual or a social group..)
“

Webster Encyclopedia Dictionary

- “Ethics: The science which treats of the nature and grounds of moral obligation; moral philosophy, which teach men their duty and the reason for it; the science of duty.”
- 2. ethic, ethic code-(a system of principles governing morality and acceptable conduct.)
- , Obligation to colleagues

If we look at these quote and definitions, an ethic theory should provide a guiding principle of special conducts which may be specific to a profession regarding the obligation or duties to the constituents. These obligations and duties are for the purpose of promoting common good for all constituents.

The author of this paper attempts to develop guiding principles (an ethical theory) to achieve the goal of resolve conflict in software engineering. In the nutshell the theory developed in this paper reduced to the following three criteria (As quoted from the paper) :

- 1. Action which yield the optimal increase in the amount of TRUST between the professional and his or her constituents.
- 2. The action must be directed toward the greater good of the EMPLOYER, and to the advancement or strengthening of the reputation and integrity of the profession as whole.
- 3. The action must demonstrate towards the virtue of humility, that is, an individual must place the needs and desires of the employer over his or her own intellectual needs and desires.
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To be a valid theory, it should subject to a test of universal applicability; especially a good theory should contain clear and unambiguous instruction for the execution and leave very little room for the interpretations. The proposed criteria are begging more questions than it answered.

Let me point out what are not so clear for each of the criterion.

1. In criterion 1, there is enough ambiguity in translating two key words into action; that is TRUST and CONSTITUENTS. How do you measure amount of trust between two parties, and usually, there are more than one constituent and how do you balance the trusts among all constituents? Trust and constituents are ethic neutral terms, that is to promote the trust between the software engineer and the constituents can be good or bad depending on what the purpose of this trust being built, the methods of acquiring these trust. To build a trust between the professional and one constituent may become collusion for the other constituents. And how do you prevent this from happening. This criterion for this reason does not qualify as a guiding principle for an ethic decision.
2. The author assumes the employer have the moral obligation of not use the employee in an unethical activities. And this criterion is based on the ethical behavior of the employer. What if the above mentioned assumption is broken, just like the Enron case? The employee's obligation to the employer should subject to the test of the ethics of this obligation. More important, it should clarify what to do of the employee when there is an ethic question about this obligation. Just document the objection and reasons and go ahead with the act , as discussed in the paper, is not the answer. This criterion fails under the universal applicability of a theory.
3. Virtue of humility as one of the criterion for determining whether an action is ethical or not can be farfetched. I am concurring that humility as a virtue and as a desired characteristic in a software engineer. In the author's words this virtue is to put employer's need and desire above the individual's. This counter to the fact that most productive utilization of an employee is to match the desires and needs of the employee to the employers.

This article is well written, but I can not agree on the proposed action criteria as a theory of ethics.

Reference: Wiley, Carolyn (2000): Ethical Standards for human resource management professionals: A comparative analysis of five major codes. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2,93-144.

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