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Data and Algorithms: Ethics and Policy - Memo 2

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Utilitarian and Kantian considerations of Fry's Data & Power Chapter

Introducing the concept of Ethics and Policy in Data and Algorithms, author Fry shares several real-life case studies of some of the most well known or mainstream actors in the space of Big Data. Mark Zuckerberg and his creation Facebook are mentioned several times throughout. In one such example, a snippet of a transcript of a young Zuckerberg and an anonymous academic peer is discussed. In the section, Mark is bragging about how willing people are to share their information with the networking site. "They trust me . . . dumb fucks," says Zuckerberg over text.

To carefully comment on this exchange, one should consider a few possible ethical frameworks at play for the young CEO. One is utilitarian, and ethical construct that questions the utility a certain action can promote. The motivation simply is an action that is morally acceptable, or better morally required if it will bring the greatest utility, or level of satisfaction (happiness) in the world. It is quite reasonable to assume Mark, with this braggadocios tone, considers his data collection practice morally right. Because of this ethical lens, he considers his system to be providing a service many people want to have. The confounding aspect is with respect to the level of data collection his system requests.

Utilitarianism is within the set of consequentialism which is an area of philosophy that values the ends opposed to favoring the means. Kantian Deontology would view Zuckerberg's attitude very differently. In this approach, human beings are considered autonomous in that they govern their own time or participation in an action. Even something like paid labor implies a person is exchanging their time for the benefits of the workplace as well as (presumably) compensation. Since this framework could be characterized as subjective, so too should humans be considered as deserving of humanity.

This confuses the moral stance of Zuckerburg's attitude, in that it calls into question his recognition of the autonomy of the Facebook patrons. Zuckerburg's nonchalant, blasé attitude of how people trust the then 19-year-old draws negative inferences about his level of humanity. Is he truly developing the social-networking-site everyone wants and consents to use or is the end user license agreement just glossed over without a second thought. It should be taken for granted that he did at this time have thousands of consenting young adult users of his software, but is it accurate to say beyond any doubt that every user understood the implications of the data volunteered on the platform?