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The Ethics of Fake Reference

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Abstract

A common assignment in introductory reference classes these days requires library school students to ask questions of a virtual reference service—usually not at their own university library—and evaluate their encounter. Often they are instructed to ask a question that might be of genuine interest to them, but there is no way to guarantee that the students even have a question of interest, leading in some cases to students asking random questions of these services. Regardless, such assignments might benefit the instructors and students, but they do so at the expense of librarians. One such interaction led to an ethical analysis of “fake reference.” Fake reference assignments are unethical. This article tests that assertion from a deontological (the right thing to do) and a consequentialist (leads to good outcomes) approach, using Kant’s categorical imperative, the American Library Association’s (ALA) “Code of Ethics,” and by testing their possible goals from the user and library perspective.

Introduction

A common assignment in introductory reference classes these days requires library school students to ask questions of a virtual reference service—usually not at their own university library—and evaluate their encounter. Often they are instructed to ask a question that might be of genuine interest to them, but there is no way to guarantee that the students even have a question of interest, leading in some cases to students asking random questions of these services. Regardless, such assignments might benefit the instructors and students, but they do so at the expense of librarians. One such interaction I had with an aggressive and arrogant student prompted my thinking on the matter, and led to an ethical analysis of what I shall call *fake reference*. Fake reference assignments are unethical. They fail to pass ethical tests both from a deontological (the right thing to do) and a consequentialist (leads to good outcomes) approach. They fail the deontological test because they cannot be reconciled either with Kant’s categorical imperative or the American Library Association’s (ALA) “Code of Ethics” (<http://www.ala.org/ala/issuesadvocacy/proethics/codeofethics/codeethics.cfm>). They fail the consequentialist test because the most reasonable goals they could have—evaluation of user services and the experience of a library user’s perspective—are either unworthy or impossible and could be attained more effectively in other ways.

Deontological Approach

Typically, one analyzes the ethics of a practice through one of two ethical perspectives: deontological or consequentialist. The deontological approach asks if an action is the *right* thing to do based upon an ethical code, while the consequentialist approach asks if the action leads to *good* consequences. First, let’s consider the deontological perspective. In deontological ethics, actions that adhere to an ethical code are right actions. Kant is the preeminent philosopher in the deontological tradition, so I turn to his

Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals for support. In that work, Kant develops what he terms the “categorical imperative.” The categorical imperative provides the rule that allows us to determine the ethics of an action. He formulates the categorical imperative in various ways. For example, Kant advises us to “act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (30). Basically, this means that you should not perform an action unless you think it would be acceptable for everyone to perform that action. Its basic tenet is captured in the “Golden Rule” to do unto others as you would want them to do unto you. Kant’s ethics is grounded in the notion that all human beings are ends in themselves, rather than means to another’s end. The world is a “kingdom of ends,” as it were. Thus, another formulation of the categorical imperative urges us to “act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means” (36). If I use someone merely as a tool to further my own ends, I would be acting unethically according to this approach.

A good example of unethical behavior to show the application of the categorical imperative, and one relevant to some fake reference transactions, is *lying*. In a deontological system, lying would almost always be considered unethical (and for Kant it *always* would be). First of all, it would be difficult for anyone to argue that lying to others should become a universal law. Even people who benefit from lying benefit *because* of the universal law that lying is unethical and wrong. It is only in a community of trust that lies can be effective ways to receive unearned benefits. Secondly, lying to benefit oneself usually means treating others as a means to your end. Though Kant did not think so, many people do believe there are exceptions to the rule against lying, telling “white lies,” for example. Usually these are considered acceptable in some circumstances because they are not being used to benefit the liar, but to spare pain to the person being lied to. A typical example would be many responses to the question, “How are you?” when asked in passing by a casual acquaintance. Regardless of the truth, the conventional answer in such circumstances is almost always “fine” or “good,” and not, “well, let me tell you about my last proctological exam.” Similarly, the correct answer to the question “Does this outfit make me look fat?” is almost always “no,” regardless of the truth.

In addition to formulations of universal law, librarians have their own code of ethics, the American Library Association’s (ALA) “Code of Ethics.” The very existence of an ethical code suggests that the ALA formulates its own ethics within a deontological approach. Under this code, librarians do things because they are the right thing to do. Rule V of the ALA “Code of Ethics” states that, “We treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith.” This statement, along with the Kantian analysis, provide us with a framework to discuss “fake reference.”

Even if students are instructed to ask questions they really have, it should be obvious that any assignment that forces students to ask questions of librarians provides incentives for students to just make up questions, i.e., to lie to librarians while also wasting their time. I have been on the receiving end of many of these interactions, and the questions I have been asked are sometimes so easily answered that it is difficult to believe the students did not already know the answer. Regardless, the entire interaction requires students to misrepresent themselves, and thus lie to librarians. The students are not in fact library users with genuine information needs, and those are the library users that reference librarians exist to serve. Would students, if they ethically analyzed the issue, really believe that it should be a universal law that people ask pointless reference questions of librarians who are assuredly overworked as it is? Fake reference transactions depend upon a framework of truth-telling and authenticity. Reference librarians act under the good faith assumption that people who come to them actually need help, and are not just there to waste time. Fake reference transactions violate this faith.

In addition, such assignments do not consider the librarians as ends in themselves, but merely as means to someone else’s end. One could argue that reference librarians have explicitly agreed to serve as means to someone else’s end, that by becoming reference librarians they have agreed that they are there to be a conduit between library users and the information they seek. However, reference librarians do not agree, even tacitly, to become merely a means for every possible end, but only for certain ends. If I willingly agree to participate in a certain relationship as a reference librarian, this is different than if I am deliberately deceived or manipulated. I’m here to help people answer actual reference questions. My action wills that reference librarians should answer such questions. My action does not, however, will that

I be used as an unwitting guinea pig in someone else's reference experiment. This might vary by library. At my private university library, we do not provide general reference for the entire world. At times, library school students from another university have not only tried to use the service for very general reference, but have actually claimed to be students working on research projects for my university, all in an effort to meet the requirements of the fake reference assignment. In these situations, the students, and by extension their professors, are not only attempting to deceive, but to use the librarians as a means to an end the librarians never agreed upon. However, even in libraries or virtual reference services open to all, there is still the problem that the good faith of the reference transaction is violated and the time librarians could use to answer genuine questions from library users in need is wasted.

We also must consider this assignment in relation to the ALA's "Code of Ethics." Is it consistent with the ethical injunction to treat co-workers and colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith? First, I do not see how anyone could argue that this assignment treats librarians with respect, fairness, or good faith. The good faith of the reference transaction is immediately violated, and using a librarian merely as a means to an end is hardly a sign of respect. But it also depends on what might be meant by *colleague*. If we mean *colleague* in the narrowest sense of just a co-worker, then the rule is less relevant. But *colleague* can also mean a fellow professional, and in this sense all professional librarians are colleagues. Admittedly, students are not yet professional librarians, and thus not colleagues even in this broader sense, but most of them will graduate and hope to become such colleagues. Because fake reference transactions fail to treat librarians with respect, fairness, and good faith, this assignment has the potential of forcing students to violate the ethical code of the profession they hope to join.

Thus, I believe the fake reference assignment completely fails the deontological test. The only possible salvation is rule VIII of the ALA "Code of Ethics": "We strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession." It could be argued that "fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession" would include participating in activities designed to benefit library school students and allow them to learn how to be good librarians. I agree that we have this ethical imperative, and I myself have been more than willing to share my experience and knowledge with library school students in various ways, including writing about professional issues, corresponding with students, and teaching in a library school. However, this imperative is negated when the initial interaction with students is one of deception and misrepresentation. While I may have an ethical obligation to help members of my profession, no one could seriously maintain that I have an ethical obligation to help people whose entire relationship to me is based on a lie.

Consequentialist Approach

If instructors give any thought to the ethics of these assignments, they invariably justify them based on a consequentialist approach to ethics. In contrast to deontological ethics, which state that actions are *right* that adhere to an ethical code, consequentialist ethics dictate that actions are ethical that lead to some *good* consequence. In this case, it could be argued that fake reference transactions are ethical, and even laudable, because they lead to some consequence that we would all consider good. This suggests a series of hard questions. What good consequences come from the deception? Who benefits by a fake reference transaction? Does the student faking the transaction learn anything? And does this make up for the deception somehow? I grant that it would be possible to answer such questions in a way that would make the transactions ethical. Fake reference assignments could pass the consequentialist test if the consequences were: 1) Attainable only in this way and 2) Worthwhile. What are the goals of such an assignment, and are they worthwhile and attainable in no other way? I see two possible goals: a) an evaluation of the reference services in question, and b) giving the student the experience of being on the user side of a reference transaction to develop a sensitivity to user needs.

Evaluation

One possible worthwhile goal that could be attained no other way is evaluating the reference service in question. Students asking fake reference questions would thus be in the long and lamentable tradition of

unobtrusive evaluation of reference services. As studies, these evaluations have led to such things as the “55% rule.” Andrew Hubbertz gives an excellent analysis of the problems of such studies, including the fact that their methodology is designed to generate mediocre ratings. He also argues that they contribute nothing towards the evaluation and improvement of services in any actual library. Furthermore, because librarians are often aware that the person asking questions is in fact a library school student with a fake reference assignment, the evaluation can hardly be called *unobtrusive*. (In my experience, these questions are very easy to spot.) However, the more serious question is whether it can even be called an *evaluation*. What is the purpose of “evaluating” one reference transaction with one librarian at one library? For evaluation of reference service to be worthwhile, it would have to be of many questions asked of the same service over time. This is the case whether the evaluation is of a service or of an individual librarian. Reference evaluation takes place either for a study of reference services in general or for actual improvement of services, and this assignment contributes to neither of those. Thus, as an evaluation of the reference service, or even the reference librarian, such assignments are nearly worthless. They can provide us only with reactions, not meaningful evaluations. “I liked this one! This one was bad!”

In addition to their questionable worth, the evaluation of online reference services can easily be obtained in other ways. Julie Arnold and Neal Kaske provide a clear and effective method for evaluating chat reference services. They evaluated transcripts and asked if the questions asked were being answered. Library school students could do the same. They could read transcripts and get an understanding both of how questions are answered and how interactions are handled by librarians. In fact, this is really the only way to properly evaluate chat reference services. Though he allows that unobtrusive methods may be necessary when evaluating in-person services, Bruce Jenson also argues against unobtrusive evaluation of virtual reference, both because having secret shoppers asking fake reference questions is less useful than mining the wealth of transcripts, and because it is “an irresponsible misuse of the time of librarians and research assistants” (145). I concur. However, as Jenson notes, “there will always be researchers convinced that their own work somehow trumps the work and lives of the people under study” (148). Indeed.

Because a single reference transaction does not provide enough information to evaluate a reference service, and because virtual reference services in particular are much more effectively evaluated using transcripts, we can conclude that the goal of reference evaluation for the fake reference assignment does not meet our criteria for ethical action. It is not worthwhile, and it could be accomplished more effectively in other ways.

Experience

As tools of reference evaluation, such assignments are nearly worthless, but what of the other reasonable goal: to give the students a “user experience”? One rationale for these assignments is to do just that. The hope is that students will have an “aha!” moment on the other end of a reference transaction. I agree that it would be worthwhile to have students truly learn to understand the library user’s perspective; however, though such a goal is worthwhile, it is not fully attainable, and to the extent that it is attainable, it could be attained in other ways.

First, we must consider the participant-observer problem inherent in this assignment. Real library users with genuine information needs often come to reference librarians as a last resort. They have been looking for information or answers and have been frustrated in some way. They do not know how to find that information or those answers. However, library school students are in no such situation. If they truly do not know how to find the answers to the questions they ask, they have not been trained properly in reference work. They will also be in no position to evaluate the accuracy of the answers they get from librarians, which must be part of any evaluation process. But, one could claim, the purpose is not for them to evaluate correct answers, but to know what it *feels* like to be a library user. Unfortunately, this is the one feeling they cannot have, because they are not real library users with genuine needs that they cannot satisfy on their own. They are just pretending to be. If they *feel* anything, they will feel the experience of being a sociological researcher, or an anthropologist, or some such, *not* the experience of being a frustrated library user. And in situations where students are outed as obvious fakes who do not need help,

but who are wasting the time of busy librarians, they do not even get the feeling of being sociological researchers. They merely get the feeling of being called to account for their deception.

Nevertheless, I still agree that the experience of sympathy with library users is an important and worthwhile goal, and in fact indispensable to good reference work; I merely disagree that this assignment can accomplish that goal. How might it be accomplished? I can think of several methods. Just as transcripts are essential to the most effective evaluation of virtual reference services, so they can also serve to give students an approximation of the experience of library users, at least as close an approximation as asking fake questions. Students could read and discuss examples of effective and ineffective reference transactions, giving them a common context for analysis. In this sense, the transactions could act on the sense of sympathy in the same way literature can. Literary critics like Wayne C. Booth and philosophers like Richard Rorty and Martha Nussbaum have argued for the efficacy of literature to shape moral selves. Are transcripts really so different? They are not the same as live interactions, I grant, but I would also argue that any students reading the transcript of a bad reference transaction who are incapable of sympathizing with the frustrated library user have imaginations so stunted they could never possibly sympathize with the user at the other end of a virtual reference question of their own.

The sense of user experience can also be gained by reflection, because all of us have at one time or another been frustrated in a search for information. It could be trying to find something in a store, or trying to navigate a difficult website. We have also all had both positive and negative interactions with people who could solve our problems if they chose—such as store clerks—or with people who were in a position of power over us and capable of frustrating us—such as teachers or bosses. How difficult would it be to share and reflect upon these experiences to understand what it would be like to be the frustrated library user? And here one cannot even argue that the experience is derived sympathy from reading. The experiences being reflected upon are just as real as the experience of the fake reference transaction, but even more relevant to get the feeling of what it feels like to be the person without the answers.

Role playing is also a possibility, though I do not think it would be as effective as transcripts or reflection. Nevertheless, this is a common practice in medical schools, where first- and second-year medical students often give practice diagnostic exams to “standard patients” pretending to have certain symptoms. This would require more effort and cost than fake reference assignments (which are very easy on the instructor if not on the librarians), but it would pass either ethical test. As it is, in fake reference assignments, the roles are reversed, and the students play the role of “standard patients,” giving the librarians the dubious benefit of learning through the diagnostic exam of the reference interview. But since the librarians never have contact with the student again, there is no learning involved. The librarian has merely been used as a tool for someone else’s benefit.

Conclusion

In conclusion, though “fake reference” assignments may meet the ethical standards of institutional review boards, such assignments cannot withstand a more rigorous ethical analysis. A deontological analysis reveals that such assignments are unethical because they cannot be reconciled either with Kant’s categorical imperative or (more importantly for our purposes) with the ALA “Code of Ethics.” Any ethical defense would have to be consequentialist in nature, yet such assignments also appear to fail the consequentialist test as well, which would require that the consequences be worthwhile and attainable in no other way. The most reasonable good consequences of such assignments are evaluating reference services and gaining a user experience. However, such assignments are worthless for evaluating reference services. They also cannot give students a true user experience, and what experience they do give could be attained more effectively through exercises that do not treat librarians in a disrespectful, unfair, and exploitative manner. The most ethical assignments would achieve the pedagogical goals of library school instructors and students, while also treating librarians with respect.

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