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Apple vs. FBI

When the Federal Bureau of Investigation requested Apple's assistance to access an encrypted iPhone, Apple's professional ethics were put to the test. What began as a single investigation into a single phone evolved into a heated debate over basic human rights. Eventually the phone was decrypted using other means, but Apple's defiance to the FBI's request revealed the company's commitment to their value of privacy and made them a role model to many other companies.

On Apple's homepage, there is a list of "Apple Values", one of which is privacy. Clicking this value links the user to a page titled "Apple's commitment to your privacy" where the user can read a letter from Apple's CEO Tim Cook. The letter begins, "At Apple, your trust means everything to us. That's why we respect your privacy and protect it with strong encryption, plus strict policies that govern how all data is handled." These first two lines state explicitly what Apple values—trust and privacy—and how they respect those values—with strong encryption and strict policies. The letter goes on to detail this privacy policy and then concludes, "Finally, I want to be absolutely clear that we have never worked with any government agency from any country to create a backdoor in any of our products or services. We have also never allowed access to our servers. And we

never will.” Not only is Apple’s value clear, but also Apple is decidedly committed to it.

The main problem with the FBI’s request is that it is unethical, particularly when considering the ethical theory of Utilitarianism, which focuses on achieving the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Some people might see Apple’s response as not utilitarian since denying access to a phone whose user is deceased harms no one and benefits both the FBI and victims of the shooting. In other words, national security is more important than the privacy of a single person (especially when that person is a terrorist). However, the technology the FBI demands cannot be limited to just this single phone. The technology would open a “backdoor” in the iPhone (*all* iPhones), putting the data security of hundred of millions of users at risk. In such a scenario, Apple’s decision to prioritize the security of hundreds of millions of people over the demands of the FBI for a single investigation is very utilitarian.

According to “Values in Tension” one of the three guiding principles is respect for core human values and basic human rights, like privacy. These values should be treated as absolutes and efforts should be made to decrease corruption. By vowing to *never* create a backdoor in the iPhone, Apple treats privacy as an absolute. Then, in addition to denying the FBI’s request, Apple is now working to further increase iPhone security. For starters, on top of encrypting the iPhone, Apple is working on encrypting the iCloud backups of the iPhone, which is one of the means the FBI has to gather data. Additionally, at this

point, Apple is at least *capable* of creating a backdoor, and they are simply refusing to do so. If Apple were somehow forced to turn over this technology to the FBI, they would have no choice but to violate their privacy policy. To prevent this, Apple is working to make encryption impossible to crack even for them. This way, no matter what, their users' privacy is protected.

However, the FBI's request is not only a matter of privacy but also a matter of public safety, because breaching privacy threatens the security of Apple's users who store a great deal of personal information on their devices. Creating and handing over this technology means risking more than just users' peace of mind. If this information falls into the wrong hands, *lives* might be at risk.

Even so, the debate still has supporters on both sides, and therefore Apple's decision has both positive and negative short and long-term implications. In the short-term, Apple received support from various other companies who agreed with their ethics and their decision. Some supporters include Facebook, Amazon, eBay, Dropbox, Google, Microsoft, Yahoo, Pinterest, Snapchat, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Unfortunately, others viewed Apple's decision to withhold from opening a "backdoor" as "siding with the terrorists". Donald Trump went so far as to make an announcement for his supporters to *boycott* Apple (only to continue using his iPhone about a month later). Apple responded to these opponents by clarifying that despite their decline of the FBI's request, they do condemn terrorism and believe the FBI has good intentions, which should not need saying.

In the long-term, which is merely speculation, Apple will be a role model for future ethical cases regarding privacy. By not backing down, even for the FBI, they set an example to other technology companies. They revealed for everyone following the debate that they are committed to their values. This commitment likely implies a long-term challenge for the FBI in gathering data, from Apple and their supporters, but as the FBI showed in this case, they have other means of obtaining information when necessary. Furthermore, although this particular case has been settled, the U.S. Department of Justice is not backing down from asking Apple for assistance in the future. Ultimately, I expect this debate will culminate in either a law *requiring* Apple to help in every way they can or a law *protecting* Apple and other companies from creating a backdoor in their products. Personally, I hope it is the latter.

In my opinion, this case defines Apple as both a corporate citizen and employer of choice. Apple is a corporate citizen because they met their ethical responsibility to protect the privacy and safety of their users. And Apple is an employer of choice because they did what they did out of respect for their employees and customers, and I think that is generally what people want in a company. It is, at least, something I look for in a company.

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