Lecture 2 Summary

Ethics is all about wanting and understanding how to do the right thing. Rather than trying to avoid bad actions, we try to know what good actions are. A hallmark of ethical thinking is recognising that there are other interests besides your own and these act as constraints to your pursuit of self-interest, regardless of whether you do something about them or not. An example would be hitting a parked car, most people would think about leaving a note. Just having the thought of it alone brings the ethical dimension into your judgment.

One of the biggest distinguishing factors between an ethical problem and a non-ethical problem is whether interests coincide. In a situation where your interests coincide with another person's interests, this is an ethical dilemma. Suppose someone tells you a secret and said "don't tell anyone," but you knew if you talked to a specific person, it would resolve this problem. This is a clear example of an ethical dilemma, however, if you first consult with that friend and they say it's fine to tell them, then this stops being an ethical issue altogether as interests no longer coincide.

In ethics, the most important characteristics are honesty, integrity, fairness, compassion, and openness. These characteristics can coincide with each other, and often it is impossible to uphold all of them. For example, if you tell a lie to save someone's life, you are being dishonest, however, you are also being compassionate. Generally, we aim to find the characteristics that fit the situation we are in.

Ethics can be divided into two major categories that outline the requirements and behaviours of different ideologies. Descriptive ethics tell us who we should be, it is about understanding what people think is right. Often descriptive ethics varies based on cultures, upbringings, and many other factors. Prescriptive ethics, on the other hand, is focused on knowing what to do by applying your principles to make judgments. Determining the principles for prescriptive ethics is often not black and white and many people choose to follow different systems.

When making ethical judgments, 4 major factors come into place, and like the characteristics of ethics, they can often coincide. These factors are your rules and duties, consequences and outcomes, virtues, and role-based morality. Role-based morality often will conflict with the other 3 major factors. If you were a lawyer and due to the negligence of your colleague you hear something that should be revealed to the public for the greater good, you have your professional duty to confidentiality to conflict with making that decision.

There are multiple ideologies when it comes to ethical thinking based on different principles. Consequentialism is a method of ethical thinking where deciding whether an act is right or wrong is based purely on whether the result is good or bad. These principles put forth by Mills form the basis of utilitarianism. Having a system based on outcomes however often leads to taking larger risks and requiring an outcome to determine if something is good or bad, which doesn't work well in practice. For example, suppose you are told to kill someone whom you think is a mass murder with only malicious intent, and this person is in fact an innocent person. By killing this person, despite your intentions being good, you acted unethically as the outcome of your actions led to an innocent person being killed.

In contrast, Deontological ethics are focused on what people do rather than the outcome of the events. Kant set out to develop a system that was consistent and universal when it came to making judgments. If you set out to do the right thing, regardless of the outcome, you were acting ethically. Two types of duties are present for Kantian ethics, perfect duties which are duties that should always be upheld, and imperfect duties that give some wiggle room. In Kantian ethics since a promise is a perfect duty, in any situation breaking a promise is always wrong, even if it results in saving a life. The idea of breaking a promise is self-defeating since it's not something you can universalise.

To conclude, this lecture focuses on what ethics is about, which is doing the right thing. Doing the right thing isn't black and white. Grey areas will often exist, due to the conflicting nature of ethical characteristics. Therefore, it is important to pick the characteristics and principles that fit the situation. Different ideologies have different extremes, and it's important to see how to apply them in each situation.

Lecture 3

Different barriers exist to ethical decision-making. Partisanship presents a barrier to entry when it comes to ethical thinking. Partisanship is when you try to work in the best interests of your client, but become too sympathetic to their interests, go too far onto their side and lose objectivity as a result. Rationalisation is the act of convincing yourself it's okay to do something benefiting your interests rather than having a client's interest in mind, this presents another potential barrier to ethical decision-making.

Other forms of barriers include bias, ethical blindness, false equivalencies, and ethical scripts. Bias is when you believe something based on no real evidence, social/political positions, or overconfidence in your capability to guarantee outcomes. For some individual's ethical blindness, being unable to see the ethical dimension to a problem, presents a barrier to making judgments, and this often requires re-education. Another common barrier to ethical decision-making is false equivalency, where you decide that it's moral because it's legal. Ethical scripts, perhaps the most common barrier to making ethical judgments, are a way of dealing with ethical problems by applying a common template that doesn't fit the situation.

Problems differ from dilemmas. A problem is something that has at least one solution, where the answer is definite, for example, 2 + 2 = 4, you can't argue that out. A dilemma on the other hand is where there are two sides to a discussion, and there is no true or false answer. All answers to a dilemma generally follow the framework of "it depends."

In a dilemma we can't use a formula to generate an answer, we instead must exercise our judgment. When it comes to matters of judgment, situations aren't black and white, you're dealing in a grey area where there are conflicting ideas. Often people will try to turn these matters of judgments into something black and white and attempt to "draw a line," however this can be seen as only one side having to compromise. The slippery slope argument is often used in these matters to deter a justification that could recurse on itself, it's often equating a series of events to the initial step, however when it comes to slippery slopes, we don't avoid, we learn how to navigate around. When it comes to matters of moral judgments, you are sharing your perspective and having a discussion, you're not agreeing on truths and falsities, you discuss grey issues.

Accountability is a historical track record of who can be held liable at any point, often it is rule-based and focuses on processes, metrics, and reporting. Responsibilities on the other hand are more generalized, focusing on being proactive, making judgments, and ethical empowerment. A code of ethics is a generalised guideline that tells us who we should be, it can be seen as an outline of your responsibilities. Code of ethics are generally domain-specific and written as applies to you, they focus on areas where ethical dilemmas could arise. A code of conduct, on the other hand, is a specific guideline that focuses on accountability. Unlike a code of ethics which can only enforce rules on general cases, a code of conduct describes specific scenarios that can't be generalised, for example how to handle a user's bank error whilst maintaining confidentiality. A code of conduct specifies what is required to uphold the values in the code of ethics. A code of conduct is a powerful tool that sends a message to the public and professionals, shapes the public image of a company, and addresses specific domain problems.

One major takeaway from this lecture was dirty hands ethics. This states that the wrongness of what you did doesn't go away just because of a good outcome, you need to take responsibility for your actions. Sometimes there are unintended consequences for doing the right thing, in ways you might have not intended, this is known as collateral damage. For example, you are told if you kill one person, you will save twelve people. In a consequentialist perspective, you did the right thing, however just because what you did was right, does not erase the wrong. Dirty hands usually affect people in leadership positions, were making the right choice can also involve making the wrong choice. A moral leader can be seen as someone who has dirty hands for doing the wrong thing for the greater good, however, they acknowledge it and take responsibility for what they did.

To conclude, this lecture focuses on barriers to ethical decision-making and how to recognise them, how to determine what is a dilemma, and the correct way to exercise judgment in a dilemma using the ethical toolset we have been building up from the previous lecture. Finally, the lecture concluded by focusing on accountability and responsibility, the difference, and how they are reflected in a code of ethics/conduct.