Computing in Contemporary Society

Edinburgh Napier
UNIVERSITY

School of Computing,
Engineering & the
Built Environment

Ethical Theories and Perspectives

Lecture two

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This week's reading and viewing

- [Tracking devices increasingly used by Australian domestic violence offenders](#) - newspaper article from June 2024

- [Would you save a boy from drowning](#) Simple illustration to explain different moral philosophies, including Utilitarianism and Deontology

- "[Facial Recognition: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver](#)" – YouTube link on Moodle

Finding academic sources for a complex topic

- This video introduces the Advanced search in LibrarySearch and shows you how to build effective searches:

- [Finding academic sources for your coursework](#)

- This video is a half hour introduction to the basics of Mendeley - including how to install Mendeley Reference Manager, import PDFs and references, and insert references and a bibliography into a Word document

- [Introduction to Mendeley](#)

Last week

- We defined ethics and discussed the reasons why, as technological innovations appear, there is a need to ask ethical questions; we discussed differing views of the relationship between technology and society

This week

- We examine several schools of ethical thinking and philosophical perspectives which guide how we might use technology in a morally sound way

This lecture is about:

- Practical ethics and the dialectic method as a basis for reasoned argument

Traditions of ethical thought:

- Rule-based / religion-based ethics

- Consequentialist schools of ethical thought

— Utilitarianism

— Egoism

— Altruism

- Deontology

Our discussion so far…

- We have determined that we *should* examine the relationship between technology and society, not just assume (simplistic or cowardly) deterministic or neutral standpoints

- Examining the morality of the issues around technology means taking a stand on what is right or wrong from a human perspective – because humans are more important than things

- We must ask **practical ethical questions**: "What is good about this technology beyond its utility?", "Is the impact of this technology unfair?" "Just because we *can* build a technology, does it mean we *have* to?"

- To determine what is right or wrong in any given subject, we should examine the case, question, topic or situation for its underlying principle first

Practical ethics ➡ theories of ethics

- We must connect the principle or value to a particular situation and consider arguments for various courses of action or decisions

- The dialectic method examines situations to discover their underlying ethical issues

- This creates a kind of Socratic dialogue (though Socrates did it through questioning)

- When we realise what the ethical problem is, there are different perspectives or traditions of ethical thought we can use to decide what is the right or moral course of action

Traditions of ethical thought: rules based ethics

In this tradition, bad actions can be avoided by means of a set of rules, e.g. the ten commandments (Jewish and Christian) below, or other religious rules

1. You shall have no other gods before Me

2. You shall make no idols

3. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain

4. Keep the Sabbath day holy

5. Honour your father and your mother

Traditions of ethical thought: rules based ethics

6. You shall not murder

7. You shall not commit adultery

8. You shall not steal

9. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour

10. You shall not covet

- It is arguably difficult to generalise these ancient rules to the complex ethical problems faced in the modern computer world

- On what moral basis would we devise rules for new situations (eg, is it right to intercept e-mail? Is using a drone to drop bombs "better"?)

Consequentialist schools of ethical thought

- Also known as **teleological** theories, they consider the **consequences** of an action as a measure of goodness

- They contrast with deontological theories, which emphasise the rightness of an action above the goodness it produces

- In Consequentialism, the right action is understood entirely in terms of consequences produced: three schools of thought are Utilitarianism, Altruism and Egoism

- The most important, Utilitarianism, had early proponents in 18th century philosophers, David Hume and Francis Hutcheson

Consequentialist schools of ethical thought

- Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) rejected religion in favour of basing moral judgements on consequences and proof, rather than intuition or conscience; in this respect, ethics is an extension of empiricism

- If an act is vicious, its viciousness is a matter of the (observable) human response to the act

- His views influenced Utilitarianism

Consequentialist schools of ethical thought

- Francis Hutcheson (1694-1746) was a Scots-Irish philosopher based in Glasgow and leading member of the Scottish Enlightenment

- "That action is best, which procures the greatest happiness for the greatest numbers" (Hutcheson, 1725); the test or criterion of right action is its tendency to promote the general welfare of mankind

- Hutcheson anticipated the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham – and not only in principle, but even in the use of the phrase "the greatest happiness for the greatest number"

Consequentialist schools of ethics: Utilitarianism

- Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) was an English philosopher, and arguably the greatest proponent of Utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism evaluates actions based on their consequences for overall happiness, and the good of an action is in the utility it produces, not in the action itself

- "Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote the greatest pleasure or happiness" (John Stuart Mill, 1863)

- Utilitarianism is also distinguished by impartiality and agent-neutrality: everyone's happiness counts the same, eg, my good counts for no more than anyone else's good

Consequentialist schools of ethics: Egoism

- This theory puts an individual's interests above every other consideration

- Ethical egoism claims "I morally ought to perform some action if, and only if, and because, performing that action maximises my self-interest"

- Any action is good as long as it maximises an individual's happiness

- What distinguishes Egoism from Utilitarianism is the scope of the relevant consequences. (In the utilitarian view one ought to maximise the overall good — that is, consider the good of others as well as one's own good, and neither is more important than the other)

Consequentialist schools of ethics: Altruism

- In altruism, an action is right if it is favourable to all except the actor

- Altruistic acts need not involve self-sacrifice, and they remain altruistic even when they are performed from a mixture of motives, some of which are <u>dis</u>interested and some <u>self</u>-interested

- **Reciprocal** altruists display that behaviour towards those from whom they have received it, or from whom they expect to receive it (eg, a quid pro quo)

- **Universal** altruism, often seen as the central ethical prescription of Christianity, is unconditional

Traditions of Ethical Thought: Deontology

- This term derives from Greek 'deon' = duty

- Stresses duties, rights and ethics of actions per se

- Examines whether an action is morally right or wrong in itself, irrespective of its consequences

- Importance is attached to the motive of a decision

- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), German philosopher, is the most important proponent of deontological, or duty based, ethics – that the sole feature that gives an action moral worth is not the outcome that is achieved by the action, but the motive that is behind the action

Traditions of Ethical Thought: Deontology

- Within the domain of moral theories that assess our choices, deontologists stand in opposition to consequentialists

- Immanuel Kant is known for his theory that there is a single moral obligation, which he called the "Categorical Imperative"

- Kant's categorical imperative is "always act out of respect for the moral law"

- For Kant, categorical imperatives are principles that are intrinsically valid; they are good in and of themselves; they must be obeyed in all, and by all, situations and circumstances if our behaviour is to observe the moral law

Ethics in practice

- Different societies, organisations and individuals have different moral values and espouse different ethical stances at different times

- There are few absolute rules

- Individual belief sets may be inherited from family, friends, workplace culture etc

- There are therefore no absolutes - "Ethical Relativism"

- The dialectic method does not always lead to a definitive conclusion about what should be done or what was wrong, but almost always leads towards achieving objectivity and better understanding

Including ethics in your coursework

- For your coursework, you must incorporate ethical theory into your chosen title's literature review

- First you need to determine what is problematic or morally or ethically wrong in the subject by an initial reading round the subject generally (eg, Wikipedia, newspaper articles)

- Next, use Google Scholar, Web of Science and the Library Catalogue to find refereed journal articles that a) inform the reader about some aspect of the topic and b) build up a range of different angles or perspectives on the ethical problem(s)

Including ethics in your coursework

- Some journal articles will explicitly mention ethical theories, but many don't; you need to read carefully to work out if the authors' views are influenced by technological determinism

- What is right or good from a Utilitarian, altruistic, egoistic perspective? What is right or good from the opposing Deontological perspective?

- Try to explore all sides of your topic informatively and backed up by evidence from references

- To give your coursework the correct theoretical content, use the ethical standpoints and philosophical traditions from lectures 1 and 2