

# **COM6655 Professional Issues**

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### **Introduction to Ethics**

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# Overview

- Introduction
- Definitions
- Western Ethical Thought
  - Utilitarianism, Intuitionism, Duty ethics, Rights ethics, Virtue ethics
- Ethical Problem Solving
- Summary and Conclusions

# Introduction

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# Introduction

- Ethical dilemmas occur frequently in professional practice; we must be equipped to deal with them.
- In particular, it's important to consider the likely effects of engineering and the software we produce.
- Tutorials have given you some practice in this.

# No right answers

- Ethical dilemmas are inherently subjective; there is no 'right' answer, and no step-by-step algorithm that can be used to solve ethical problems.
- In this part of the module we consider:
  - The origins of (western) moral and ethical philosophy;
  - Practical approaches to ethical problem solving.
- This is a superficial overview of a very deep subject!

# Definitions

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# Definitions

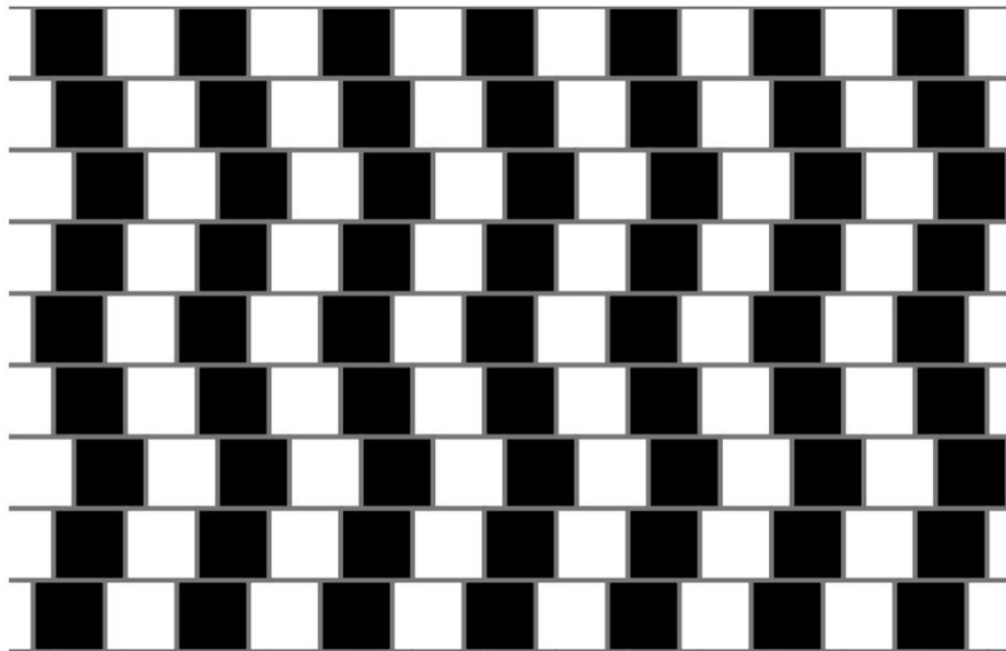
- We will be discussing:
  - Philosophy
  - Moral philosophy
  - Personal and professional ethics
- We start by explaining what these terms mean (in the context of this module).
- These ideas may seem a world away from information and computer science.
- Why do they matter?

# What is philosophy?

- The main purpose of philosophy is to critically evaluate assumptions and arguments.
- Philosophy asks us to examine assumptions that people accept without question
- E.g. *Seeing is believing.*



# Seeing is believing?



Parallel lines?

# Are our beliefs justified?

- Having examined our beliefs and assumptions (our own, and other people's), we need to decide – do our beliefs make sense?
- On consideration, we will either:
  - Decide that we have good reason to hold the belief, and continue to hold it (**but now with rational assurance** rather than unthinking acceptance);
  - Decide that we do not have good reason to hold the belief, and suspend judgement or seek a new framework of belief.

# Moral philosophy

- Moral philosophy is inquiry about values:
  - ideas of right and wrong,
  - good and bad,
  - what should be done and what should not be done.
- Moral philosophy is not practical in any simple sense; it cannot, and does not try to, tell us what to do.
- However, philosophical debate can conclude that a set of beliefs should definitely be rejected if:
  - It is internally inconsistent OR it rests on a factual assumption that is false

# Personal and professional ethics

- Ethics concerns the philosophical discussion of assumptions about right and wrong, good and bad, considered as general ideas and applied
- In the private life of individuals (personal ethics)
- To the behaviour of individuals within a particular profession (professional ethics)
- The terms moral philosophy and ethics are often used interchangeably, but moral philosophy has a wider scope; it concerns values in organised social life (politics and law) as well as private and professional relationships.

# Grounding for rules of conduct

- What are our reasons for believing that some behaviours are better than others? For example:

“Do not steal”

- This is widely accepted as a rule of conduct.
- But why is stealing wrong?
- What is the basis for accepting this rule of conduct?  
What is its grounding?

# Religious grounding

- “Stealing is wrong because it offends God”
- Grounding in a religious system
- Q. What are the possible objections to this?

# Legal grounding

- “Stealing is wrong because it violates the law”
- Grounding in law
- Q. What are the possible objections to this?

# Philosophical grounding

- “Stealing is wrong because ... (give a reasoned argument)”
- **Grounding in philosophy**
- According to this approach there is no external authority that can be consulted to find the answers. Everything is based on reason.
- **Q. What are the possible objections to this?**