

HUMAN ETHICS

Mark Lee | *m.g.lee@cs.bham.ac.uk*
School of Computer Science,
University of Birmingham 2025



The health lottery

- Every year people die due to the lack of transplant organs
- One healthy person has several healthy organs – heart, kidneys, lungs, liver, blood, eyes, etc.
- Therefore if we were to select one person and force them to donate all their organs, we could save several lives
- Unfortunately this would be fatal – but we'd kill one person and save several.

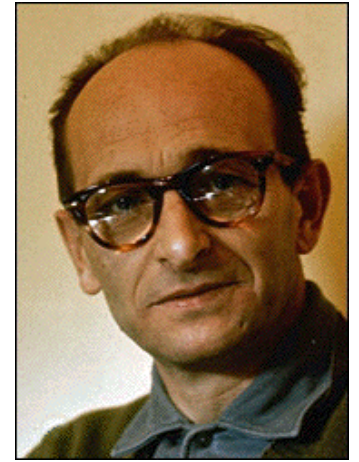
(therefore)



- Proposal: Health Lottery once a month for all citizens between 18 and 30. Selected person(s) will be forcibly euthanized and body parts used to save the lives of many.

Introduction

- Ethics is the branch of philosophy which considers what is right and wrong behaviour.
- Most people consider themselves to be “good”
 - Responsible
 - Decent
 - Honest
- Clearly bad things happen
- Claim – much evil is done by not considering ethics more seriously
- Sometimes the ethics of a situation are complex.



Stuxnet

- Sophisticated virus/worm discovered in 2010
- Probably developed by US/Israeli Intelligence
- Spread by MS Windows
- Actively targets Siemens Industrial SCADA systems
- by Iranian Nuclear Reactors
- http://www.ted.com/talks/ralph_langner_cracking_stuxnet_a_21st_century_cyberweapon.html
- Duqu (Sept, 2011)
- Flame (May, 2012)
- What are the ethics of this?
 - Delay of Iranian Nuclear Missile Programme
 - Worldwide infection of Windows PCs
- Alternatives
 - Smart Bombs
 - [Assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists \(Jan, 2012\)](#)

What is Moral Philosophy?

- Philosophy – rational analysis of assumptions and arguments
- Moral Philosophy asks basic questions
 - What does it mean to be/do good?
 - What is wrong/evil?
 - How can we make sure we live a “good life”?
- Moral Philosophy is not directly practical
 - It doesn't tell us what to do
 - Rather how to evaluate what we do within a moral framework.

Do not steal

- Why is stealing wrong?
 - Religion
 - But not everybody believes in a religion
 - Surely atheists can be moral?
 - Against the law
 - Slavery was legal in the US
 - Apartheid in S. Africa
 - Society norms
 - Is morality just like fashion or popular tastes in music?

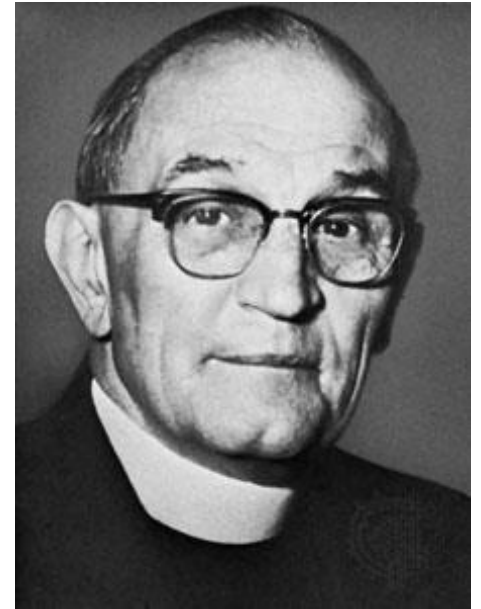
Discussion Stoppers

Four objections to moral discourse (Tavani 2011)

- People disagree on solutions to moral issues
 - But also disagreements in all aspects of science
 - Most of us agree on the major points of morality
 - (don't steal, don't kill, wear clean clothes in computer labs)
- Who am I to judge others?
 - Sometimes judgement is needed
 - Human rights abuses
 - Sometimes we need to intervene
- Morality is a private matter
 - Not just private beliefs
 - Your actions (and mine) effect others
- Morality is a matter for individual cultures to decide
 - Moral relativism
 - Female circumcision, slavery, ages of consent (requirement of consent)
 - Considerable agreement across cultures

Martin Niemöller (1892-1984)

First they came for the communists,
and I didn't speak out
because I wasn't a communist.
Then they came for the trade unionists,
and I didn't speak out because
I wasn't a trade unionist.
Then they came for the Jews,
and I didn't speak out because
I wasn't a Jew.
Then they came for me,
and there was no one left to speak for me.



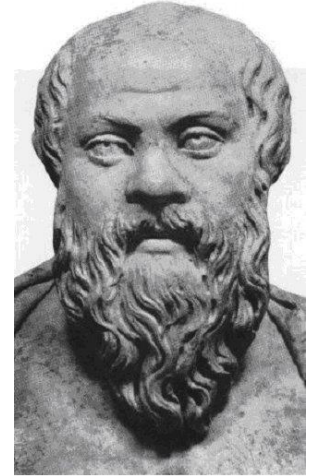
Milgram's experiment

- 1963 psychology experiment
- Inspired by trial of Eichmann in Israel
- Volunteers are asked to help administer an experiment on learning word combinations
- Play the role of teacher
 - Ask questions to another “volunteer”
 - Administer Electric shock for every wrong answer
 - Voltage increases each time
 - Other volunteer might mention their heart condition
 - Up to four prods to continue experiment
 - High degree of stress for most volunteers
- 65% of volunteers willingly give a lethal 450 volt shock



Virtue Ethics

- Ethics was a pre-occupation of Greek Philosophy
- Socrates (469 BC)
 - A good life is one based on self development rather than wealth
 - Virtues – courage, honesty, friendship
 - The community is more important than the individual
- Aristotle (384 BC)
 - Virtue is the proper function of a thing
 - An eye is good if it sees
 - A person is good if they follow their soul with reason to achieve happiness
 - To be happy requires a good character
- Epicurus (341 BC)
 - Point of life is happiness, tranquility and friendship
 - Self-sufficiency
 - Pain and pleasure are measures of good and evil
 - Hedonism



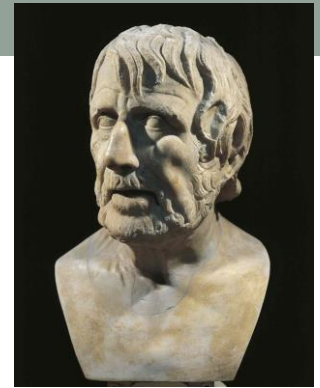
Stoicism

- Founded by Zeno of Citium (3 BC)
- Popular with the Roman Empire
- Marcus Aurelius (121-180 CE)
- “When you wake up in the morning, tell yourself: The people I deal with today will be meddling, ungrateful, arrogant, dishonest, jealous, and surly. They are like this because they can't tell good from evil. But I have seen the beauty of good, and the ugliness of evil, and have recognized that the wrongdoer has a nature related to my own—not of the same blood or birth, but the same mind, and possessing a share of the divine”
- Rationality and acceptance of misfortunes
- Passion is the cause of suffering
- Ignorance the main cause of evil in the world
- Thinking as a spiritual (and moral) exercise
- Equality and brotherhood of all mankind



... till 529 AD - philosophy is outlawed by Justinian 1st

Stoic Ethics



Virtue is the Highest Good

Wisdom – Knowing what is good, bad, and indifferent.

Courage – Facing challenges and adversity

Justice – Treating others fairly and fulfilling social duties.

Temperance – Practicing self-control and moderation.

Live According to Nature

Dichotomy of Control

What we **can control** (our thoughts, actions, choices)

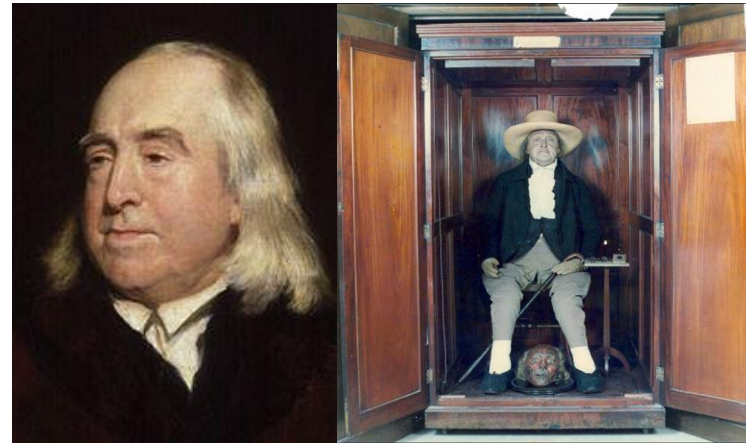
What we **can't** (others' actions, events, outcomes)

Indifference to External Things (such as wealth)

Oikeiôsis (Moral Development)

Utilitarianism

- Jeremy Bentham (1780 AD)
- Hedonic Calculus
- Any pleasure or pain can be measured and quantified
- Act Utilitarianism (John Stuart Mill, 1863)
 - An action is right if it promotes happiness
 - Choose the action that will produce the greatest amount of happiness (= pleasure – pain)



Utilitarianism and the Law

- People tend to be selfish (?)
- Greatest happiness for greatest number implies altruism
- Law exists to enforce altruism for the benefit of society
- Why stealing is wrong
 - Stealing increases the happiness of the thief
 - but lowers happiness of original owner
 - And makes rest of society feel insecure
 - Laws against theft protect society
 - Punishment should be just enough to deter anti-social acts (but no more)

Problems

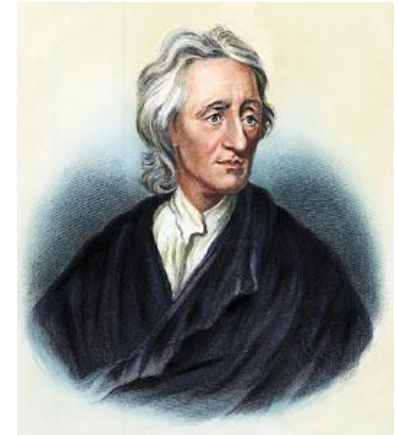
- How do you quantify pleasure and pain?
- How do we decide what is good if we don't know the consequences
- Should I give 20 pounds to two pensioners or 20p to 200 pensioners?
- Utilitarianism ignores the needs of an individual
 - Specialist Medical treatments need funding
 - Funding comes from taxes
 - Taxes make everybody (else) unhappy
 - Therefore perhaps we should stop medical treatments except for common illnesses
- Your house is on fire – who do you rescue first?
 - Your mother
 - The vicar (having tea with your mum)
 - The young burglar upstairs

Stanford Prison Experiment

- Phillip Zimbardo (1971)
- 24 Student volunteers were classed as either jailers or prisoners
- Mock prison in basement of department
- Orientation Session for guards
 - Mock uniforms and wooden batons
 - Advised not to hurt prisoners but create fear, boredom, anxiety
- Within six days ...
 - Guards are psychologically torturing prisoners
 - Attacking prisoners using fire extinguishers (day 2)
 - Creating a “honour” cell – rewarding good prisoner behaviour
 - Prisoners are (mostly) accepting torture
 - Prisoners gang up on prisoners who refuse to continue experiment

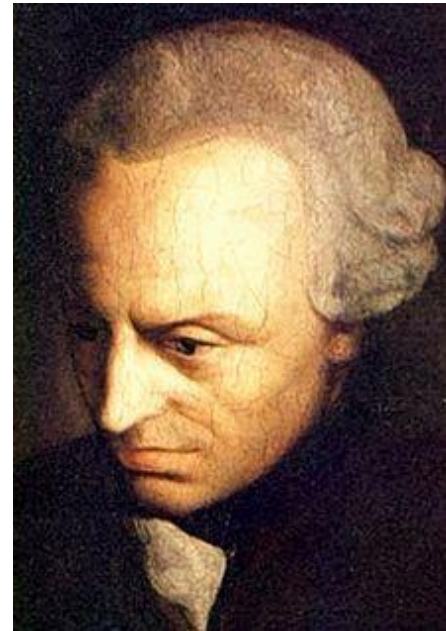
Rights ethics

- Good actions respect the rights of individuals
- Rights Ethics (John Locke, 18th century)
- Humans have essential rights
- French Declaration of Human Rights (1789)
 - Universal equality
 - “liberty, property, security and resistance to oppression”
- US Bill of Rights (1789)
 - “life, liberty, and estate”
- More recently
 - the European Bill of Human Rights



Duty ethics

- Imperatives for right behaviour (Kant, 1785 ...)
- Hypothetical (prudential)
 - If you want to be healthy, take exercise
- Categorical (moral)
 - No if – moral reason is enough
 - Be kind
 - Be honest ...
- No exceptions
- “By a lie a man throws away, and as it were, annihilates his dignity as a man”

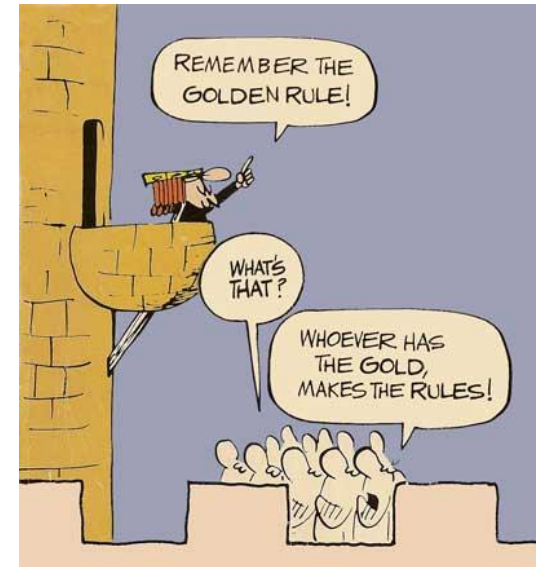


Categorical Imperative (Kant)

1. Act as if you are legislating for everybody else
 - If you do an action, would you want everybody to behave that way?
 - Treat any action as if it was a law for everybody
2. Act so as to treat human beings always as ends and never merely means
 - I pay a man to work in my garden
 - I own a slave who works in my garden
3. Act as if you were a member of a realm of ends
 - Realm = state, community
 - Act as a member of a community
 - All of whom treat each other as ends rather than means
 - All of whom decide as if they were legislating for all

The Golden Rule

- One should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself
- One should not treat others in ways that one would not like to be treated



- “Hence, (keeping these in mind), by self-control and by making dharma (right conduct) your main focus, treat others as you treat yourself.” Mahābhārata (~9th century BC?)
- “Never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself.” – Confucius (5th century BC)
- “And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise” Luke 6:31 (70-90 AD ?)

The Third Wave

- Ron Jones, High School Teacher (1967)
- Californian High School Experiment
- Simulation of Nazi/Fascist party
- School kids asked to join the Third Wave :
Strength through discipline, Strength through community,
Strength through action, Strength through pride
- First day
 - Small number of rules (stand to speak, address teacher as Mr. Jones)
- Second day
 - closed fist salute, more rules
- Third day
 - better academic grades, group grows
 - 200 members of the Third Wave
 - Third Wave members start informing on other members
- Fourth Day
 - Experiment stopped due to “concerns”
- Jones was fired two years later. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asmPoLk-hLA>)



Summary



- Most of us regard ourselves as good people
- For the most part, we probably are.
- Hanlon's Razor:
"Never attribute to malice, that which can be explained by stupidity"
- However many studies show that (good) people can behave badly given the right conditions
- History constantly teaches us much worse
- "an unexamined life is not worth living" (Socrates)