# CS 211 – Professional Issues in Computing

## Lecture 2 – Ethical values

In this week's lecture we will summarise the 3 main branches of ethical thinking, from which many important building blocks of society are derived, such as laws, political philosophy, and professional ethics.

It is important again to note that our personal ethical stance is our own, and while we will discuss distinct approaches to ethics, there is no one correct answer. Ethics is a subject that great minds have been concerned with for thousands of years, and that is likely to remain the case for a long time to come.

*Consequentialist ethics*

Consequentialism relates to the potential outcomes of an action and the ethical ramifications of said action. What is important for the consequentialist is that the outcome is satisfactory, not necessarily how that outcome has been achieved. The main consequentialist ethical theory is utilitarianism.

*Utilitarianism*

The father of modern utilitarianism was Jeremy Bentham whose theories were developed further by John Stuart Mill. The basic formula for utilitarianism is the greatest happiness for the greatest number; not individual happiness, but happiness for the largest number of people.

Utilitarianism had a significant effect on political philosophy through the Victorian era and well into the late 20$^{th}$ century before it was arguably supplanted by philosophies more focussed around individual freedoms. The emergence of major public services, welfare systems, and institutions like public libraries and museums can be attributed to the emerging utilitarian thinkers of the Victorian era. From a purely public stance, utilitarianism has had a significant effect on the development of information services to the public, and to this date it remains a political philosophy that curries great favour with many public sector professionals.

There are two important subsets of utilitarianism we should consider:

- *Act utilitarianism*: each particular act is judged by its own consequences
- *Rule utilitarianism*: a set of rules are developed that when obeyed are believed to maximise utility (Anderson, 2006: 4)

Rule utilitarianism, then, we can see as being something more geared towards organisations and states. The utility for the majority is enhanced if everyone pays their taxes, for instance.

As we have stated, utilitarianism relates to the happiness and well-being of the majority – therefore in a utilitarian world it is acceptable for some in society to lose out if the happiness of the majority is the consequence. This is an important concept, since taken to its extreme it could advocate harm being allowed to a small number of people to benefit the majority. Clearly this raises significant issues of natural justice that have to be addressed by any ethical thinker. In addition, since utilitarianism is focused on the consequences of an action, the ethics of the motive itself can be questioned.

*Virtue ethics*

Virtue ethics has its origins in the classical philosophy of Aristotle. A major consideration in classical mythology was what the virtuous life would actually be, and this informed the concept of living the *good life*, and being a good person. At the heart of the concept was *eudaimonia* or happiness, the point of the virtuous life being to maximise happiness (Crisp, 1998, 2011). In this context virtue ethics has been compared to utilitarianism. Indeed it could be argued that virtue ethics is of less importance as an ethical theory than either consequentialism or deontological theory, as both of these theories adopt so much consideration of what is the right thing to do. As Benn has observed, “In contrast to Kantian and utilitarian approaches, Aristotle is not concerned to discover a supreme practical principle telling us what to do, or to derive any secondary moral rules from such a principle” (Benn, 1998: 161).

The concept of virtue is that it is a mean between excess, on one hand, and deficiency on the other. Importantly however, it is not about moral absolutes such as anger, or pleasure being always automatically right or wrong:

> Anger, for instance, can be virtuous, provided that it is experienced in the right degree, towards the right object and at the right time. Pleasure, too, is virtuous when taken in the right things and in the right degree (Benn, 1998: p.166).

Virtue ethics is arguably of less practical application than either deontological or consequentialist ethics. Since its focus is on the subjective human condition, it is more difficult to apply its theories to discussions of professional ethics. Benn summarises one of the key issues around this subjectivity well:

> a wealthy aesthete who lacks a social conscience, and who surrounds himself with fine things and refined human company, does lead the good life – he does flourish. But the demands of morality, perhaps of a Kantian or utilitarian kind, still generate objective practical reasons for him to attend to more impartial concerns (Benn, 1998: 183).

We are however increasingly seeing reference to aspects of virtue ethics in both politics and professional practice in some noteworthy ways. References to "hardworking families", "entrepreneurial spirit" and "leadership" reference Aristotle's ethical stance.

*Deontological ethics*

Deontological ethics relate to the concept that there are certain values or actions that are inherently good or bad.

Deontological, or duty-based, ethics are primarily based around the theories of Immanuel Kant, a German 18th century philosopher. Kant was not convinced by the concept of utilitarianism, believing that it ignored a fundamental point in ethics that some actions were by their very nature good or bad and that this, not the consequences of the actions, were what is important. As we have seen above, taken to its extreme utilitarianism could support murder or theft or torture, if as a result of these acts the happiness of the majority was guaranteed. The deontologist would instead see the act as being right or wrong, regardless of the consequences.

In essence Kant provided four axioms related to his ethical world view that have been argued to provide basic guidance. Firstly, Kant's concept of goodwill related to the desire on the part of the human being "to act correctly, fairly, or ethically". The second is duty, which could be regarded outside of a strict government role such as military, or security, to be rather an old-fashioned concept from Kant's time. It can, however, be considered to apply to professional ethics.

Kant's *categorical imperative* is arguably the most important of his theories related to ethics. In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, published in 1785, he stated two further important maxims that underpin his theories. The first of these maxims states that "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a

universal law". Within this oft-quoted line lies the basis of an ethical theory that has been interpreted and re-interpreted to this day. The basis of the imperative is that any action should be morally justifiable by virtue of it being measured against it being a potential universal law of nature. As Anderson has observed, this is a lofty and rather impractical sentiment (Anderson, 2006: 3). From a normative standpoint it essentially means that actions that are unjustifiable to a reasonable person are morally unjustifiable. For instance, we would not wish theft or murder to become universal laws of nature, therefore under Kant's imperative, these actions are never justifiable. Conversely for the consequentialist they *can* be if the outcome aids utility.

Kant's final maxim relates to the morality of how we use other human beings. He states "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end". Using a human being as a means relates to using them solely to further your own interests, and not thinking of their interests. Treating them as an end, on the other hand, means considering their interests in any dealings you may have with them. This essentially means respecting their freedoms to make decisions and to act in their own interests. This part of the categorical imperative is the basis of many of the rights-based philosophies that currently exist.

**Rights-based concepts**

The rights each citizen should expect to be afforded is what forms the main concern of rights-based philosophers. These are considered from myriad standpoints, such as the right of the individual not to have their interests interfered with by society or organisations, as well as the right to maximise one's own happiness first and foremost.

As may be obvious, rights-based approaches can clash somewhat with consequentialism in some of their manifestations. Indeed, the right of individuals versus the rights of the largest number could be seen to be one of the most persistent philosophical debates of the past 40 or so years, since political philosophy from the 1970s onwards has been heavily influenced by rights-based notions of individual freedom, especially related to free-markets.

*Negative and positive rights*

An important aspect of such rights-based theories relate to the concepts of *negative and positive rights*. Positive rights consider the notion that citizens have a set of expectations as to the services they should receive from the state. Often referred to as *welfare rights*, they incorporate issues such as education, health, unemployment benefits and the like. In opposition to positive rights, negative rights are based around the notion that people should

not be unjustly interfered with, and that the over-riding maxim should be one of freedom to pursue one's own interest first and foremost.

Negative rights inform the thinking of many who label their beliefs as libertarian in origin, and can often mean mistrust of state intervention, publically-funded services, and taxation. Indeed, one of the key thinkers in the area, Robert Nozick, has labelled taxation as tantamount to making the taxpayer a slave of the state. For negative rights philosophers, the concept of self-ownership is of paramount importance, and the freedom to choose how their interests are advanced should be theirs and theirs alone.

### The trolley problem

Ethics can be a tricky subject to master if unfamiliar with philosophy, however a very useful thought experiment exists that can quickly emphasise the key aspects of the subject well.

Imagine you see a trolley car speeding down a track headed towards five people who are unable to get out of the way. The people will certainly be killed if no one intervenes. As it happens you are standing beside a lever that will allow you to divert the trolley car onto another track, however in doing so one person on that track will be killed.

What would you do? Is diverting the trolley to spare five lives the ethical thing to do, knowing another life will be lost? What are the ethical implications of either pulling the lever, or not pulling the lever?

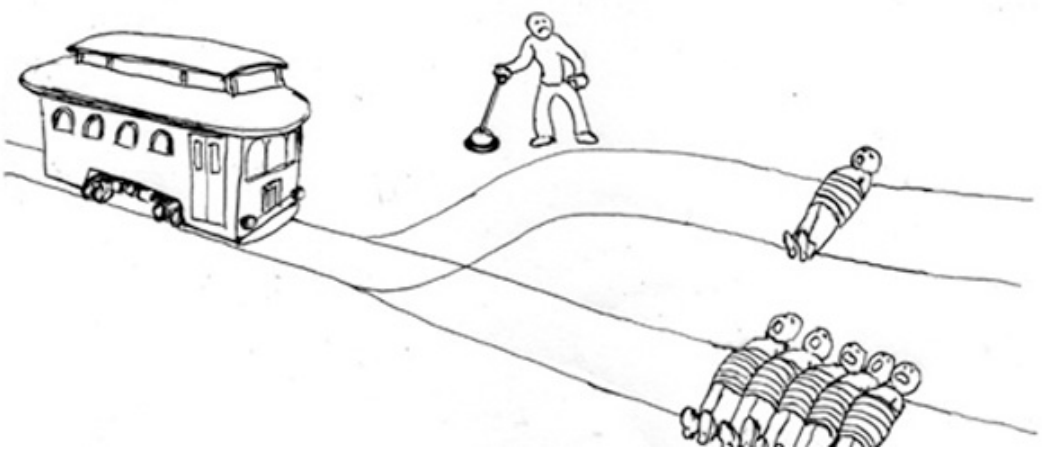

**FIGURE 1 - TROLLEY PROBLEM - SCENARIO 1 (QUARTET, 2016)**

If you feel that the right thing to do is pull the lever, you may favour a consequentialist approach to ethical thinking, as you have chosen an approach that believes the loss of one life is preferable to the loss of five. This is a very common response to the trolley problem.

If you do not feel that pulling the lever is the right thing to do, you possibly favour a deontological approach to ethics, believing that all of the lives are of equal value and that it is wrong to favour five over one.

A twist on the scenario occurs when the problem is adapted to include you standing on a bridge beside a large man. You see the trolley careering towards the five people on the track, and you alone can save the five by pushing the large man on to the tracks to stop the trolley.

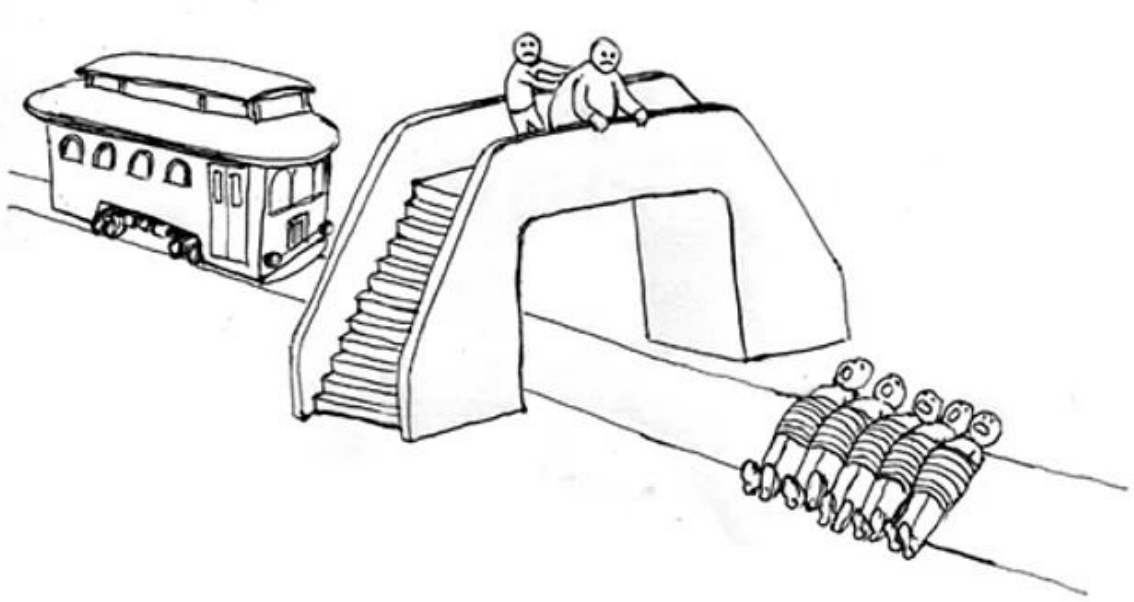

**FIGURE 2 - TROLLEY PROBLEM - SCENARIO 2 (QUARTET, 2016)**

Again, would you do it? If you said yes in the first problem, but no in the second, what differences exist between the two approaches? Does something different occur when you are asked to intervene in the second problem that did not occur if you did so in the first?

The trolley problem provides a thought-provoking challenge to our ways of thinking ethically.

**References**

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**Further Reading**

ADAMS, Andrew A. and McCRINDLE, Rachel J. (2008) *Pandora's Box: social and professional issues of the information age*. Chichester: John Wiley and Sons. ***Ch. 1.***