TICT 3142 Social and Professional Issues in IT

Lesson 07   Ethical Theories

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Introduction: What are "Ethics"?

"The study of what it means to 'do the right thing"

(A Gift of Fire: Social, Legal, and Ethical Issues for Computing Technology, (4th ed) Sara Baase p.333)

• **"Making a principle-based choice between competing alternatives"**

(Ethical decision making and info1·111ation technology: an introduction with cases. EA Kallman & JP Grillo, p.3)

• **Ethics comes from a Greek word meaning "usual" or "the instituted order"**

- o Making principled decisions

- o Making defensible decisions

What are ethics?

• Principles based on our understanding of what is good, right, proper, moral, or ethical.

• Ideas of behavior that are commonly acceptable to society

• We are influenced by a variety of sources such as family, religious institutions, educational institutions, professional organizations, government, etc.

Why care about ethics?

- **Self-interest:**

  o Some unethical actions are also **illegal**

  o Some can effect our careers and reputation

- **For the interest of the others**

  o Some unethical decisions can hurt other individuals, the organization we work for, or society

  o Ethical decision-making impacts on the type of society that is created

  o Ethical practices are a reflection of the factors that the members of a particular society place value on

What is Ethical Decision Making?

- When faced with an ethical dilemma the objective is to make a judgment based on well-reasoned, defensible ethical principles

- The risk is poor judgment i.e. a low-quality decision

- A low-quality decision can have a wide range of negative consequences

Questions

Write down the ethical decisions which can be taken for the below scenarios,

- An app developer collects user location data for app functionality. They realize they can also sell this data to advertisers for profit.

- A cybersecurity professional discovers a critical vulnerability in a company's system that hasn't been patched.

- A software engineer needs a paid library to complete a project, but doesn't have the budget. They find a pirated version online.

- A company wants to track employee productivity by monitoring emails and keystrokes.

Question

- A team is developing an AI recruitment tool and discovers that the model discriminates against certain gender or ethnic groups.

- A student or developer copies a chunk of code from a public repository without giving attribution in a college assignment or open-source contribution.

- A tech company tweaks a recommendation engine to promote their products more, while suppressing better-performing competitors.

- An IT consultant working with multiple clients has access to confidential system designs.

Historical Determination of Ethics

- The historical determination of ethics refers to how ethical principles and systems have been shaped and developed throughout human history, influenced by culture, religion, philosophy, and societal needs.

- In the context of Information Technology (IT), understanding this evolution helps us apply age-old ethical concepts to modern digital dilemmas.

Historical Determination of Ethics – Overview

1. Ancient Ethics

•**Socrates (470–399 BCE):**

Introduced the idea of self-examination and questioning moral beliefs.

→ *"The unexamined life is not worth living."*

•**Plato (427–347 BCE):**

Ethics based on the **ideal forms**—truth, justice, beauty—and the idea of a **just society**.

•**Aristotle (384–322 BCE):**

Proposed **Virtue Ethics**: Good actions come from good character and habits.

→ Introduced the **Golden Mean** (balance between extremes).

2. Religious and Cultural Influence

•**Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and Judaism** all contributed moral codes:

- *"Do no harm," honesty, justice, charity, and respect for others.*
- **Examples:**
  - Ten Commandments (Judaism/Christianity)
  - Five Precepts (Buddhism)
  - Sharia Law (Islam)
  - Dharma (Hinduism)

Immanuel Kant
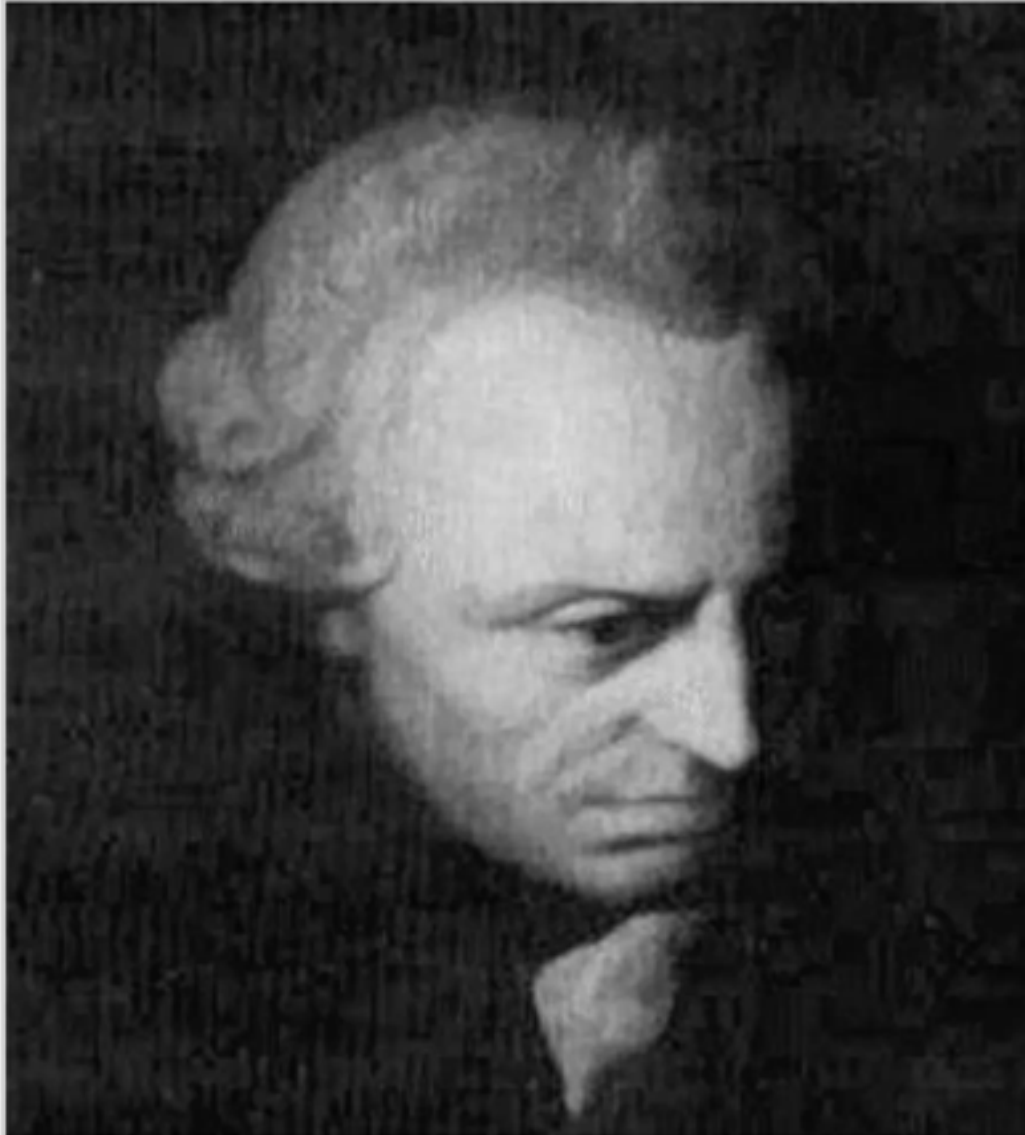
Philosopher.
1724 - 1804

Deontology

Absolutism

Kantian Ethics

Stanford Encyclopedia of
Philosophy - Deontology

Deontology

- The term deontology comes from the Greek word deon, meaning duty.

- The theory of deontology states we are morally obligated to act in accordance with a certain set of principles and rules regardless of outcome.

- Immanuel Kant's use of the word essentially means that we should "separate ourselves" and our own needs and preferences from our ethical decisions. Thus we do right as a matter of "duty"

- Our ethical methods and values should arise outside ourselves. They do not depend on humans for their existence.

Kant's Principles

► Kantian Ethics - also known as Absolutism

► Based on the idea that the only consideration is the "Act" itself

► Actions are either intrinsically moral or not moral

► Decisions should be based on whether or not the action is a moral one

Kant's principles

1. **The principle of** CONSISTENCY: Judge your actions by considering the outcome should your action be made a universal law. (i.e. What if it was compulsory for everyone to do what you are doing?)

2. **The principle of** RESPECT: Always consider human beings as ends in themselves, never as means to an end. (i.e. Treat others as valued people. Never just use them for your purposes.) This is Kant's principle of "respect".

3. **The principle of** DUTY : Actions performed out of a sense of duty (that also conform to 1 & 2 above) are morally praiseworthy actions.

Kant would say ...

► We have responsibilities and duties.

► Some things are "right" and some are "wrong" regardless of whether we agree or not.

► Doing "right" will not necessarily be to us advantage. In fact, whether an action is or is not to our advantage is a very poor way of judging its merits.

Strengths of Kantian ethics

► In Theory it is based on "pure reason":-

► Provides a much-needed challenge to moral relativism.

► Facilitates ethics based on the big picture.

► What is seen as "hypothetical" is really a "logical extension" of consequences.

► Takes moral consequences seriously.

► Avoids problems caused by the complexity and diversity of human opinion, culture and need.

Challenges to Kantian ethics

► **"Pure reasons":-**

   ► Lacks compassion.

   ► Leaves no flexibility to take human frailty and diversity into account.

   ► Offers a single moral solution to what is really a complex and diverse problem.

   ► Can be challenged as "essentially hypothetical".

   ► Can be challenged as being simplistic.

Relativism

Relativism is the philosophical view that moral standards, values, and truths are not universal—they vary depending on culture, society, time, or individual perspective.

In simple terms, what is considered "right" or "wrong" depends on who you are and where you are.

Types of Ethical Relativism:

1. **Cultural Relativism**

Morality is based on cultural norms.

Example: Polygamy may be acceptable in one culture and not in another.

📌 *"There is no universal moral truth—only cultural opinions."*

2. Moral Relativism (Individual Relativism)

Right and wrong are determined by the individual's personal beliefs.

Example: One person may believe lying is always wrong, while another sees it as acceptable in certain cases.

📌 *"What is right for you may not be right for me."*

3. Situational Relativism (Situational Ethics)

Ethics depend on the context of the situation.

Example: Stealing might be wrong, but stealing to save a starving child may be considered acceptable.

📌 *"It depends on the situation."*

Deontological Ethics (Duty-Based Ethics)

"Follow the rules and do your duty. Don't worry about the outcome."

Key Principles:
- Acts are morally obligatory if they follow a universal moral law.
- Emphasis is placed on intention and not outcomes.

Application in IT:
- Reporting a system vulnerability regardless of the consequence.
- Always informing users about data collection.

Pros:
- Clear moral guidelines.
- Promotes consistency and accountability.

Cons:
- Can lead to rigid or impractical outcomes if strictly followed.

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a consequentialist ethical theory that says:

An action is morally right if it produces the greatest good (happiness or pleasure) for the greatest number of people.

In short:
      "The ends justify the means."
      "Do what brings the most happiness to the most
         people."

Consequentialism (Utilitarianism)

Rooted in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, deontological ethics evaluates actions based on adherence to rules, duties, and obligations, irrespective of the consequences.

Key Principles:
- Focus on the consequences of actions.
- Moral rightness is determined by utility (happiness or well-being).

Application in IT:
- Allowing data analytics if it improves services for a majority of users.
- Implementing surveillance if it enhances overall security.

Pros:
- Practical and outcome-oriented.   Flexible in different scenarios.

Cons:
- May overlook minority rights.
- Can justify unethical actions if outcomes are positive.

Virtue Ethics

Founded by Aristotle, virtue ethics emphasizes character over rules or outcomes. It focuses on becoming a good person rather than simply doing good acts.

Key Principles:
- Cultivation of virtues like honesty, courage, and fairness.
- Moral behavior stems from a virtuous character.

Application in IT:
- Ethical behavior in coding and development practices.
- Choosing projects aligned with personal and societal values.

Pros:
- Encourages holistic ethical development. Builds moral character over time.

Cons:
- Lacks clear decision-making rules.
- Subjective interpretation of virtues.

Ethics of Care (Feminist Ethics)

Emphasizes interpersonal relationships, empathy, and compassion. Developed in contrast to abstract principles of justice.

Key Principles:
- Morality is grounded in caring for others.
- Context and relationships are crucial.

Application in IT:
- Designing inclusive and accessible interfaces.
- Protecting vulnerable groups in system design.

Pros:
- Highlights relational and emotional factors.
- Promotes empathy-driven decisions.

Cons:
- Can be too context-specific.
- Difficult to apply universally.

Rights-Based Ethics

Focuses on respecting and protecting individual rights such as privacy, freedom, and consent.

Key Principles:
- Every individual has certain moral and legal rights.
- Ethics involves upholding these rights.

Application in IT:
- Ensuring user consent before collecting data.
- Designing systems that respect freedom of expression.

Pros:
- Strong protection of individual dignity.
- Clear reference for legal compliance.

Cons:
- Rights may conflict (e.g., privacy vs. security).
- Requires balancing competing claims.

Justice and Fairness Theory

Introduced by philosopher John Rawls, this theory stresses fairness, equality, and impartiality in decision-making.

Key Principles:
- Equal access and fair treatment.
- Veil of ignorance: designing systems without bias.

Application in IT:
- Eliminating algorithmic bias.
- Ensuring equitable access to digital services.

Pros:
- Promotes social justice and equality.
- Suitable for diverse environments.

Cons:
- Requires detailed fairness evaluation.
- Conflicts with efficiency in some cases.

Pragmatic Ethics

Ethics should evolve with societal change and be grounded in practical outcomes. Popularized by John Dewey.

Key Principles:
- Moral guidelines evolve through experience and context.
- Problem-solving orientation.

Application in IT:
- Adjusting data privacy norms with technology changes.
- Rewriting policies based on public feedback.

Pros:
- Adaptive and context-sensitive.
- Encourages real-world testing of ethics.

Cons:
- Can lack stability or permanence.
- Risk of ethical relativism.

Ethical Egoism

"The morally right action is the one that best promotes your own self-interest."

Key Principles:
- Self-interest is morally acceptable.
- Individuals should act in ways that benefit themselves.

Application in IT:
- A company maximizing profits via data collection.

Pros:
- Encourages self-responsibility.

Cons:
- Often conflicts with social or collective ethics.
- Risk of exploitation.

Divine Command Theory (Theological Ethics)

An action is morally right if God commands it, and wrong if God forbids it.

Key Principles:
- Morality is rooted in the will of God.
- Actions are right if commanded by God.

Application in IT:
- Avoiding software that violates religious codes.

Pros:
- Clear guidance for religious adherents.

Cons:
- Subjective to interpretation.
- Not universally accepted in secular domains.

Contractarianism (Social Contract Theory)

is the ethical and political theory that morality is based on a social agreement or contract made among individuals to create a fair and just society.

Key Principles:
- Ethics arises from mutual agreement.
- Fair systems should be agreed to under conditions of equality.

Application in IT:
- Terms of service as mutual agreements.
- Ensuring transparency in online contracts.

Pros:
- Basis for legal and political systems.

Cons:
- Assumes all individuals have equal negotiating power.

Professional Code-Based Ethics

Ethical behavior is guided by codes developed by professional organizations.

Key Principles:
- Adherence to defined ethical standards (e.g., ACM, IEEE).
- Ensures accountability in professional settings.

Application in IT:
- Following the ACM Code when designing systems.
- Rejecting tasks that conflict with professional ethics.

Pros:
- Provides a standard reference.
- Encourages trust in the profession.

Cons:
- May not cover all ethical scenarios.
- Requires enforcement and education.

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