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Engineering 350

Monday 2:00PM

Reading Assignment 1: Ethical Theories

02/04/2013

*To Be or Not To Be*

For this reading assignment, we examined several theoretical frameworks covering ethics and morality. In general, ethical theory elucidates the balancing act we undergo in managing the needs of individuals and groups against other individuals or groups. Although human beings come with some intuitive sense of right and wrong, a single comprehensive theory for explaining and prescribing a solution to ethical dilemmas remains elusive.

The text for our class first covers *utilitarianism,* which asserts that a given action is permissible and desirable if it results in greater social utility than any other alternative. “Utility” in itself is difficult to define, but the author chooses to equate it with “happiness.” This equivocation is problematic because the word “happiness” is hopelessly vague and therefore would suggest that utilitarian solutions are also inherently vague. There are means by which one can quantitatively derive utility, however. Nevertheless, utilitarianism rests on two assumptions according to the author.

First utilitarianism requires that all people seek happiness or, in other words, attempt to maximize utility.[[1]](#footnote-1) On its face, this assumption seems straightforward and reasonable: every human being acts rationally in its own self-interest. Assuming this is true then it stands to reason that maximizing the collective good of a particular group or society should be justified; this is the second assumption. One possible weakness is this argument is that if we use “happiness” or “desire”, as the Tavani does, then it appears that utility is then circularly defined as whatever it is that makes one happy or whatever is desirable. Again, however, utility can be quantitatively defined and does not necessarily rest on subjective definition.

Tavani also points to another perceived flaw utilitarianism: on the surface it seems to justify the tyranny of the majority. An act is permissible if it is sufficiently in the interest of the majority regardless of the harm it might do to those in the minority. The example given is that of slavery where the majority apparently benefit from the forced servitude of a few. Indeed, if one were to look at this situation in an early instant, this would be problematic. It remains, unclear from the author’s presentation if any case of slavery would ultimately benefit the majority more than its abolishment. Thus, it also remains unclear if there are any instances where the tyranny of the majority maximizes collective utility. Aside from this, an unresolved hurdle of utilitarianism is that morality is essentially tied to utility which intuitively seems incomplete[[2]](#footnote-2).

If we fail to find our ethical base in the consequences of our actions, then we can turn to the acts themselves. Tavani first goes to Kant, and *deontology*, for a solution to the perceived short-comings of *utilitarianism*. Kant argues first that man is rational creature which is capable of transcending acts committed in the pursuit of “sensory pleasure,” which again the author unfortunately equivocates with the concept of utility[[3]](#footnote-3). Nevertheless, because man is able to transcend his nature, he can form moral communities of obligation where moral acts are not necessarily bound to the maximization of utility. Secondly, Kant asserts that any moral system must treat individuals as ends and not means to an end. In other words, in a moral system, all acts must rest on some principle which may be applied to all individuals in the community. This is a formalization of the “golden rule”: one should treat others as one would like others to treat oneself.[[4]](#footnote-4) Tavani writes that although it might be difficult to determine whether utilitarianism would allow slavery, for example, deontology would not. If a moral community were to allow slavery, it would mean that individuals would be classed into two groups: slaves and masters. This clearly violates the assertion that all people be treated impartially so a moral community many not allow slavery.

According to Tavani, some philosophers believe that it is unclear whether, as a rule, avoids a conflicting situation where one or more ethical principles suggest contradictory actions[[5]](#footnote-5). If this is the case, then Kant’s moral formulation is, at best, incomplete because it does not provide for resolution of these cases. Instead, Tavani presents us with David Ross who argues that although Kant was basically correctly, it is important to intuitively and then deliberately, resolve these conflicts. In other words, there is no top-down moral system that may govern a community of people but instead a convolution of instances in which a moral system grows from the bottom-up. Tavani concludes the deontological section by admitting that Ross’s ideas have not gained widespread acceptance.

If neither the consequences of action nor an over-arching rationale governing action provide relief from our ethical dilemmas, then what are the alternatives? Thomas Hobbes looks to natural history for guidance. In humanity’s “pre-moral” period we had complete individual liberty within the restraints of the physical world. We survived by scavenging for food and water, finding natural shelter and fending off attacks from other men and animals. It was a “brutish” existence.[[6]](#footnote-6) At some point, human beings began to form communities of mutual cooperation. Although individuals gave up an amount of freedom, the reward was a life less brutish. The nature of our ethical conflicts is rooted in finding a balance between these individual freedoms and our obligations to our communities. In other words, we have social contracts both implied and explicit in nature. On occasion those contracts abridge our individual freedoms but we ultimately continue to honor our obligations because it serves our needs more in the long run.

The problem with contract-based ethics is, in essence, we are not obligated to perform acts for which we are not contracted. Especially problematic are instances where inaction rather than deliberate action leads to harm (e.g. pulling the trolley handle). Contact-based ethics does not obligate us to abstain from inaction to assist others even when there is little or no risk to ourselves. In both utilitarian and deontological systems, presumably, this is not the case.

Another version of contract-based ethics is rights-based ethical theory where our rights and obligations are not derived from laws or legal precedence but from precepts that are self-evident. “Negative rights” according to Tavani are those acts which we are guaranteed to without interference from others. The example given in the text is the right to vote. “Positive rights” are those acts which we are guaranteed exclusive to the needs of others. While we might be given the right to access the Internet freely, we are not given the right to the means to access it freely.[[7]](#footnote-7) “Positive rights” are not necessarily self-evident if it requires choosing between outcomes where one individual or group benefits while another is harmed. Therefore, although “rights-based” ethics might lend us the means - the vocabulary - with which to describe an ethical dilemma more clearly, it does not necessarily provide the means with which to resolve them.

Finally, Tavani introduces us to character- or virtue-based ethics where ethics rests on the habits of individuals and not on individual actions. While a particular situation or even a broad category of situations may be difficult to resolve under utilitarian, deontological or contract-based theories, we may find relief by turning away from the study of those situations entirely by turning to character-based ethics. In other words, if we examine what makes a moral individual and then educate others on such acquiring such characteristics, then our ethical dilemmas would be resolved ad hoc. From another point-of-view this is equivalent to skirting around the quandaries presented by the ethical dilemmas themselves. We have no means, under character-based ethical theories, to judge whether a particular act will lead to a desirable outcome or whether the framework that leads to an act is itself, in general, just. Tavani asserts that character-based ethics may flourish in community-based societies. While this might be true, it is left to the reader to determine if these same community-based societies might also be vulnerable to lapses in ethical judgment, in general.

In the end, the reader is left with four categories of theories each of which has clear, and subtle, advantages and disadvantages. As is always the case with philosophy, if a single solution were known to exist, the discussion would no longer philosophical. So long as the topic remains as it is today, it is the discussion of these ethical issues, our attempts to explain them and to provide some method for their solution that is ultimately import. In the section following our reading, Tavani even examines the possibility that while none of these four frameworks provide a complete moral system, we might find some relief in their combination.

1. Herman T. Tavani, *Ethics and Technology: Controversies, Questions, and Strategies for Ethical Computing* (Wiley, 2013), 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid., 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. This concept is common knowledge but this particular wording was taken from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Herman T. Tavani, *Ethics and Technology: Controversies, Questions, and Strategies for Ethical Computing* (Wiley, 2013), 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)