

CS 4873: Computing, Society & Professionalism

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Week 3: Relativism & Utilitarianism

February 3, 2021

Homework

- Homework 2 due next Monday (2/8)!
- Make sure to do your reading commentaries, quizzes.

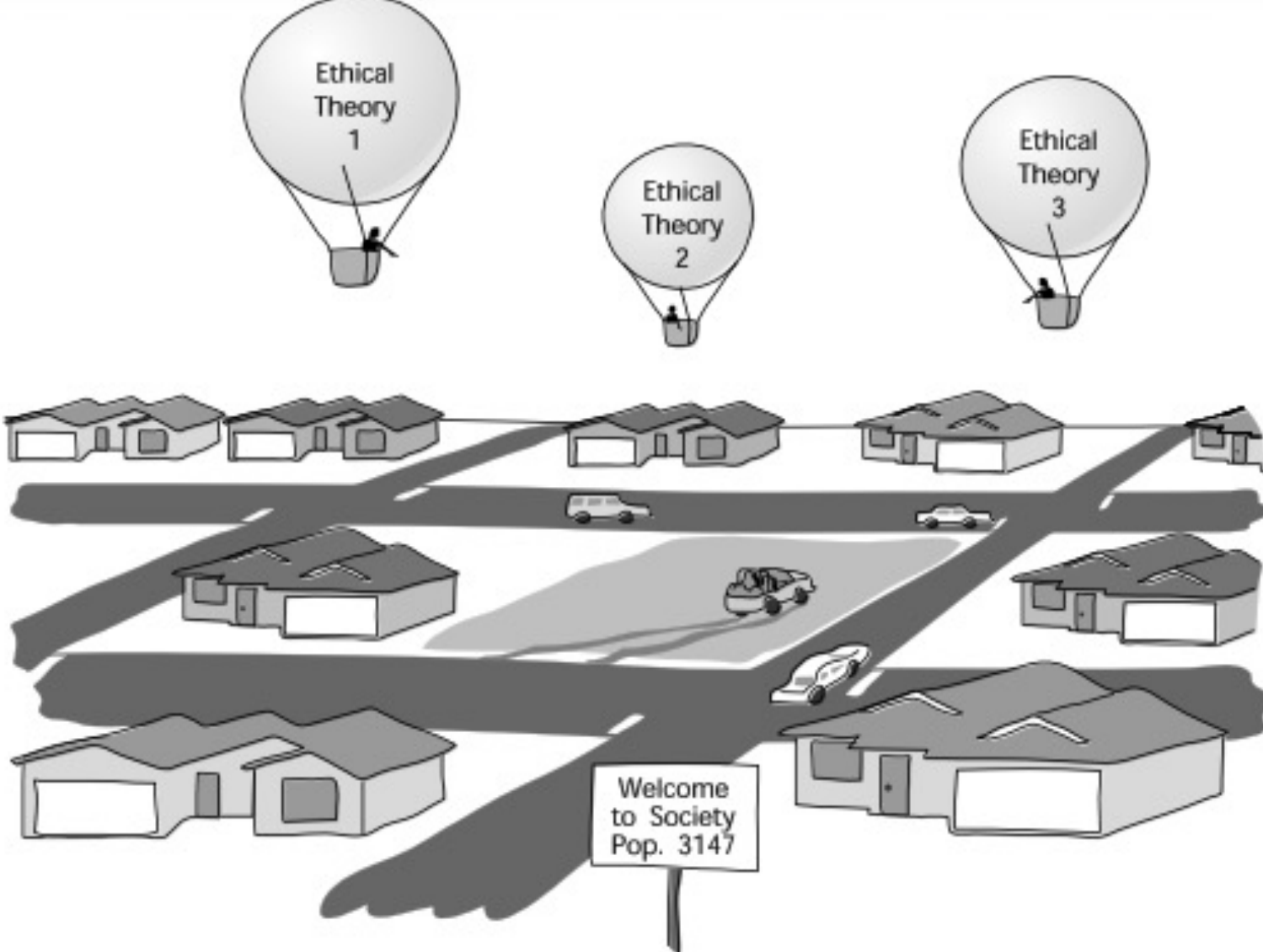
Homework	Due Date	Weight Toward Grade
HW1: Therac and the Boeing 737 MAX	Feb 1	3%
HW2: The Politics of Computing	Feb 8	3%
HW3: Applying Ethical Frameworks to a Dilemma	Feb 22	3%
Term Paper Proposal	Mar 1	5%
HW4: Fair Use	Mar 8	3%
Term paper Outline	Mar 22	5%
HW5: New ACM Code	Mar 29	3%

These things count towards the “homework” portion of your grade.

How this class intersections with your professional life

- Artifacts have politics.
 - NOT democrat vs. republican
 - They influence the “complex of relations” between people
- Different artifact designs engender different politics.
- You are a designer / creator of artifacts.

How can you, as a computing professional, make ethical artifacts?



Ethics & Morality

- Every society has rules of conduct that define what people ought and ought not to do in different situations. We call these rules morality.
- Ethics is the philosophical study of morality, a rational examination into people's moral beliefs and behaviors.
 - It studies free human acts from the point of view of their moral value (their goodness or badness)

The goal of ethics?

- To obtain true and systematic knowledge of upright and authentic human behavior based on universal principles
- To establish a series of norms and criteria for judging human acts
- To study the basic truths about the human nature
- To establish guiding principles that facilitate life in a community or society
- To come up with practices and customs that foster responsible and good habits in a personal conduct

(Usually) No clear answers

- Can argue many aspects of human behavior from multiple perspectives
- What is “right” and “wrong”?

Ethical theories give you different ways to think through problems.

Ethical theories are “workable” if:

they make it possible for a person to present a persuasive argument to a diverse, skeptical but open-minded audience.

Relativism & Cultural Relativism

Subjective Relativism

- Morality is not a universal law, like gravity; it is not something that can be observed and measured, so rational people cannot discover or try to understand it
- We each create our own morality.
Ethical debates are pointless,
because there is no “universal truth”

Question

- Both Adolf Hitler and Martin Luther King Jr. spent their lives working towards what they believed was right
- Can you justify the morality of their actions with subjective relativism? Why or why not?

Okay but what if...



Idea: “I can decide what is right for me, as long as it does not hurt other people”



But how do you determine what counts as “hurt”?



How do you determine who counts as “people”?

Problems with Subjective Relativism

- The line between doing what is “right” vs what you “want” is thin
- There is no moral distinction between the actions of different people
 - The actions of someone like Adolf Hitler is as “right” as someone like Martin Luther King Jr.
- The idea of tolerance is inconsistent with this theory
- It is not based on reason
 - People are good at legitimizing bad behaviors

Unworkable!

Cultural Relativism

- Okay okay okay, maybe everyone doesn't get to make their own morality, but at least individual societies and cultures can do so.
- Individual societies and cultures can decide for themselves what's 'right' and 'wrong' and other societies and cultures should stay out of it.

Q: Testifying against a friend

- Your friend was given a speeding ticket. You were in the car and know he was speeding. They're challenging it in court. You are a witness.
- Take a minute and answer:
 - Would you testify that your friend was not speeding?
 - Why or why not?

Q: Testifying against a friend

- Results are culturally dependent:
 - 90% of Norwegians would not lie about it
 - 75% of Americans and Canadians
 - 50% of Mexicans
 - 10% of Yugoslavians

Can we ever say the values of another culture are "wrong"?

- In response to a drought:
 - Culture A: builds aqueduct
 - Culture B: sacrifices someone to the rain god
- Are both strategies equally “ethical”?

Problems with cultural relativism

- No explanatory power
 - Doesn't help us understand how one group creates its standards
 - Doesn't explain why moral guidelines evolve
 - Doesn't explain how to resolve conflicts between cultures
- Cannot decide which standards are best

Unworkable!

Not a pass to be a cultural imperialist

- Cultural relativism is not a workable ethical framework but it also does not give you free reign to think that your culture is better / superior / more ethical
- Remember: we must use reason!
- Cannot really assess cultures whole-sale but individual decisions / actions

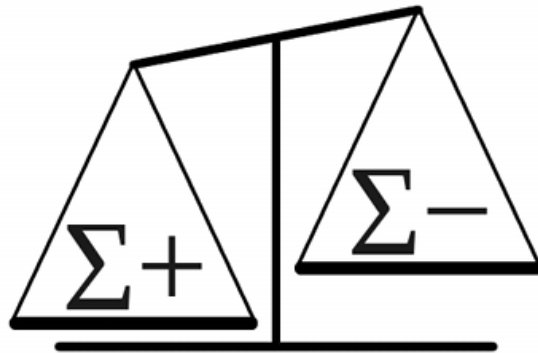
Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism

- Also called “consequentialism”
- Principle of Utility (Greatest Happiness Principle)
 - "An act is right (or wrong) to the extent that it increases (or decreases) the total happiness of all affected parties."
- The intention behind an act does not matter – only its consequences

Act Utilitarianism: The algorithm

- For each human act, calculate its utility:
 - Sum benefits over *all* parties that benefit.
 - Sum costs over *all* parties that incur costs.
 - If total benefit > total cost, the act is “good”. Else, it’s “bad”.



Think about The Stop Sign with Act Utilitarianism

Recall from 1st lecture:

You are driving out in the desert. You can see in all directions for miles. No one else is around. You see a stop sign. Do you stop? Why or why not?



The calculus

- Action: run the stop sign
- Affected parties
 - You and your passengers
 - ...that's it? (maybe your mom if she found out)
- Benefits
 - You get where you need to go marginally faster (+1 happiness!)
- Costs
 - None?
 - Maybe guilt knowing you will forever be a renegade (0, or -1 happiness)
- So, either +1 or 0 happiness.

Facebook Premium as an Act Utilitarian

- As a high-level product manager at Facebook, you must decide if Facebook should release a “premium” ad-free, tracking-free service for customers willing to pay \$10/month.

Benefits of Act Utilitarianism

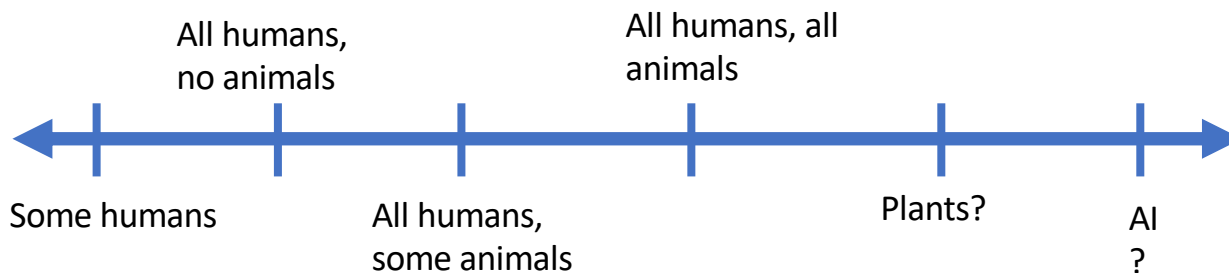
- It focuses on happiness
- It is practical
 - e.g., at which location in a city should a new prison be built?
- It is comprehensive
 - Allows the moral agent to take into account all elements of a particular situation
 - e.g., truthfully answering your partner's question if their bad haircut looks good

Problems with Act Utilitarianism

- Hard to calculate the utility of an act
- Have to choose bounds
 - Who is an affected party?
 - How far in the future should we look?
- We can't always easily predict the outcome / consequences of an act
 - Susceptible to 'moral luck'
- Forces us to use a single scale or measure for disparate things

Who is an affected party?

- Which beings are “morally relevant”?
 - At one point in this country, only white men
 - Animals?
 - Plants?



Problems with Act Utilitarianism

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 - How far in the future should we look?
 - We can't always easily predict the outcome/consequences of an act
 - Susceptible to 'moral luck'
 - Forces us to use a single scale or measure for disparate things
- Doesn't account for our 'innate sense of duty'
 - Might be okay to break promises if breaking a promise produces more happiness
 - There are no absolute rights

It's okay to break promises

- You made a promise to your spouse that you would be in town for their birthday.
- Later, you get a job interview for your dream job, but you have to travel on your spouse's birthday.
- Breaking the promise:
 - 1000 units of unhappiness for your spouse.
 - 1001 units of happiness for you.

There are no individual rights

- We can kill one person and harvest their organs to save the lives of 10 other people.

Rule Utilitarianism

- Designed to address some of the problems of act utilitarianism by appealing to a higher construct: rules
- Adopt moral rules which, if followed by everyone, will lead to the greatest happiness
 - E.g., “Promises should be kept”, “Parents should take care of their children”, “Murder is not allowed under any circumstances”, etc.

Rule Utilitarianism: Advantages

- Performing the utilitarian calculus is simpler
 - Not every moral decision requires calculating consequences of an individual action
- Exceptional situations don't overthrow moral rules
 - a rule utilitarian would argue that the utility of everyone keeping their promises outweighs the benefit of someone breaking a promise in a particular situation
 - Solves the problem of moral luck
- Solves the problem of bias
 - Instead of asking “is it OK for me to do this,” ask “is it OK for everyone to do this”

Class Discussion: The Stop Sign as a Rule Utilitarian

You are driving out in the desert. You can see in all directions for miles. No one else is around. You see a stop sign. Do you stop? Why or why not?



Facebook Premium as a Rule Utilitarian

- As a product manager at Facebook, you must decide if Facebook should release a “premium” ad-free service for customers willing to pay \$10/month.

Rule Utilitarianism: Problems

- Still difficult to perform utilitarian calculus
 - Still forces us to use single scale to measure disparate things
- Ignores the problem of unjust distribution of benefit or harm
 - Increase one person's happiness by 1000 units vs 50 people's by 10 units
 - Facebook might get more money, but a premium ad-free service might exacerbate the digital divide

