CS 4873: Computing, Society & Professionalism

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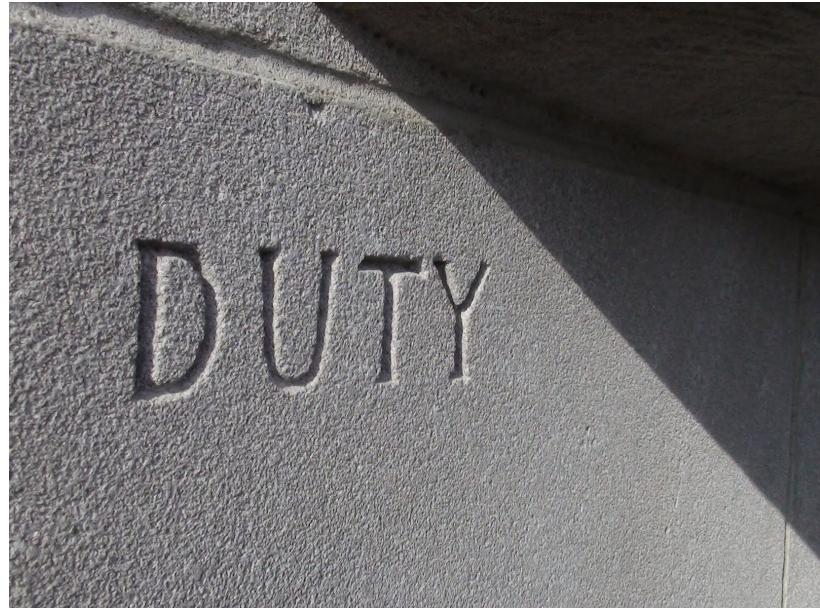
Week 4: Deontology

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Slides adapted from Sauvik Das, Munmun de Choudhury, and Amy Bruckman

Deontology (Kantianism)

- Dictionary definition: "the theory or study of moral obligation"
  - Normative ethical position that judges the morality of an action based on rules
 - From Greek root "deont" -> That which is binding
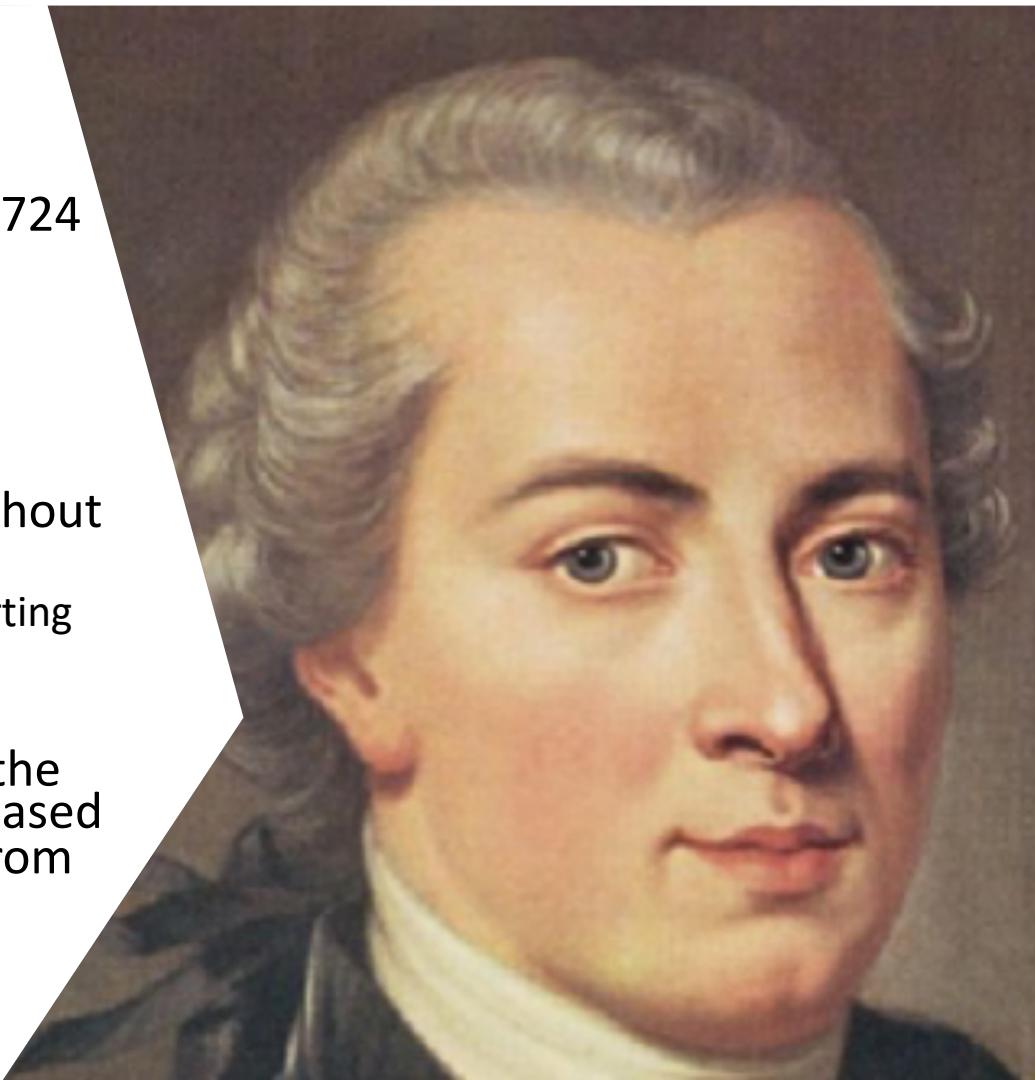
Deontology

- Morality is based on reason
  - An act is right *iff* it conforms to the relevant moral obligation; and it is wrong *iff* it violates the relevant moral obligation.

- Unlike utilitarianism: the consequences of an action are irrelevant to moral evaluation

- The value of an action lies in motive – especially motives of obligation
  - You're not on the hook for sending your allergic aunt flowers in the hospital!

Kantianism

- Based on the writing of philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804)
  - People should be guided by universal moral laws. Must be based on reason.

- The only thing that is good without qualification is good will.
  - Morality derived from this starting premise.

- A person has good will only if the motive of his or her action is based on moral obligation, derived from universally valid norms.

Duty

- All persons must act not only in accordance with, but for the sake of, obligation
    - A person's motive for acting must rest in a recognition that what he or she intends is demanded by an obligation

- Assumption that people are rational and are dutiful
    - A dutiful person feels compelled to act in a certain way due to respect for a universal moral rule

Kantian imperatives

- An imperative is a way that reason commands the will

- Two types of imperatives:
  - Hypothetical
    - If I want to obtain e, then I must obtain means m
  - Categorical
    - An imperative that has no exceptions

Kantian perspective on imperatives

- Kant believed that hypothetical imperatives could not persuade moral action because they are based too heavily on subjective considerations.
  - Part of the reason why he was dissatisfied with utilitarianism / consequentialism.
  - They tell us which means to best achieve our ends, but do not tell us which ends we should choose.

- Difference between "right" (moral obligations) and "good" (positive consequences for actions)
  - "Good" is irrelevant

The Categorical Imperative

- The Categorical Imperative in Kantianism is moral law that every moral agent recognizes whenever accepting an act as morally obligatory. "The supreme moral law"

- Morality must be based on the categorical imperative: you are commanded by it, cannot opt out, or claim that it does not apply to you.

- Something becomes a universal moral law when:
  - It requires unconditional conformity by all rational beings, regardless of circumstances
  - Is unconditional and applicable at all times

Two formulations of the Categorical Imperative

Categorical Imperative: Formulation One

- Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws.

  - In layman's terms: If it's okay for you now, it should be okay for everyone at anytime.
  - Remember: Kant's argument is **not based on consequences**. He argues that breaking the categorical imperative is illogical / against reason.

Case Study: Lying

- Using the first formulation of the categorical imperative, how can we show that lying is wrong?

- If I can lie in this situation (e.g., to tell my partner their bad haircut looks good), everyone should be able lie in every situation

- If everyone lied all the time, no one would believe anything anyone said.

- In this world, a lie would cease to have meaning because everything would be a lie so there would be no "truth"

- Logical contradiction -> immoral

Categorical Imperative: Formulation Two

- Act so that you always treat both yourself and other people as ends in themselves and never only as a means to an end.

  - In layman's terms, perhaps: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you?
  - Human beings have inherent value because we can "rise above our instincts"
  - Objects have instrumental value (e.g., car keys)
  - By treating a human as a means to an end,
    you are neglecting their inherent value
    and treating them like an instrument.

Case Study: Plagiarism

- Using the second formulation of the categorical imperative, show that plagiarism is immoral.

- By plagiarizing, you are using your professors and TAs as "grading machines"—instruments whose only purpose is to give you a passing grade

- You are neglecting their inherent value as humans

The two formulations are thought to be equivalent

- Show that lying is immoral, according to Kant, using the second formulation

- Show that plagiarism is immoral, according to Kant, using the first formulation

To sum up…

- Humans may not be treated as having merely instrumental value
  - While using animals for human ends is perfectly appropriate
  - Using humans as a (mere) means to an end is immoral
  - This is the essence of immorality
  - The essence of moralilty is treating people as ends in themselves and never a means to an end

Class Discussion: The Stop Sign as a Kantian

- 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?

Kantianism advantages

- Rational

- Universal
  - Not dependent on the particulars of a given situation
  - All people are treated equal

- Appeals to our innate sense of "duty"

Case study: Stealing food to feed starving children

- You are an able-bodied adult but have little money. You come across impoverished, starving children. There's a grocery store nearby, but you can't afford to buy any extra food.

- According to Kantianism, is it right to steal food to feed starving children?

Kantianism disadvantages

- It's rarely the case that a single rule characterizes an action
  - There's no way to resolve conflict among rules
    - e.g., stealing vs lying vs helping others in need
- Allows for no exceptions
  - Lies that save social face (e.g., the bad haircut)

Perfect vs imperfect duties

- To help resolve conflicts between some rules, Kant made a distinction between "perfect" and "imperfect" duties.

- Perfect duties must be followed always.
  - "Thou shall nots," (e.g., no stealing, no lying)
  - No exceptions

- Imperfect duties must be followed unless they conflict with perfect duties.
  - Helping others
  - Cultivating your skills

Imagine that someone is fleeing from a murderer and tells you that he is going home to hide. Then the murderer comes by and asks you where the man is.

You believe that, if you tell the truth, you will be aiding in a murder. Furthermore, the killer is already headed the right way, so if you simply remain silent, the worst result is likely.

What should you do? Let's call this the Case of the Inquiring Murderer. Under these circumstances, most of us think, you should lie. After all, which is more important: telling the truth or saving someone's life?

Kant's response

- Cannot predict what will happen as a result of one's actions. Morality must be based on reason and not speculation.

- A bit iffy—we often live our lives based on a few extremely likely speculations: e.g.,
  - The sun will rise

- One possible fix: allow exceptions to a moral rule if anyone else can also make that exception.
  - I can lie to the Inquiring Murderer if I would be okay with everyone else lying to the Inquiring Murderer in the same circumstance

Contrasting with Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism

- Consequentialist

- The consequences are most important.

- Pleasure over Pain; calculation of "utility" is mathematical.

Kantianism

- Deontological

- The motive is what matters, not the consequences.

- The Categorial Imperative reigns supreme.