

# IT Ethics

## Ethical Theories

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## Topics

### Introduction

Definitions  
Method  
Discussion Stoppers  
Guidelines

### Theories

Utilitarianism  
Deontology  
Social Contract  
Virtue Ethics

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## Descriptive Claims

- ▶ **descriptive** claim: what is
- ▶ subject of sociology, psychology, anthropology, political sciences

### example

*85% of computer users don't obey license agreements.*

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## Normative Claims

- ▶ **normative** claim: what should be
- ▶ subject of philosophy

### example

*Computer users should obey license agreements.*

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## Moral System

- ▶ rules of conduct: individual directives, social policies
- ▶ evaluation principles: social utility, ...
- ▶ *public*: rules are known to all members
- ▶ *informal*: no enforcement
- ▶ *rational*: based on principles of reason
- ▶ *impartial*: not biased to any member

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## Setting Rules

- ▶ considering **core values**
- ▶ *intrinsic*: happiness, autonomy, privacy, ...
- ▶ *instrumental*: money, ...
- ▶ grounding the principles:
  - ▶ religion
  - ▶ law
  - ▶ philosophy

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## Method of Philosophical Ethics

- ▶ **dialectic**
- ▶ make a claim, state a principle
- ▶ test the principle in various cases
- ▶ adjust your claim and/or the principle

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## Dialectic Example

- ▶ “Euthanasia is wrong because human life should not be ended intentionally.”
- ▶ conscious and in too much pain
- ▶ unconscious and has brain damage
- ▶ young - old
- ▶ “quality of life”
- ▶ consistency when applying to other problems: war, capital punishment, abortion, ...
- ▶ “self defense, saving others, ...”

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## Discussion Stoppers

- ▶ philosophers disagree on fundamental issues
- ▶ how can others agree?
- ▶ experts in other fields also disagree
- ▶ light: waves or particles?
- ▶ there is agreement on many issues
- ▶ disagreement on principles - disagreement on facts

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## Relativism

- ▶ cultural relativism:  
“Different cultures have different beliefs about morally right and wrong behaviour.”
- ▶ descriptive claim, stated normatively:  
“What is morally right or wrong for members of a culture can be determined only by that culture.”
- ▶ moral relativism
- ▶ there are some universal moral laws

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## Guidelines

- ▶ why do we need ethical theories?
- ▶ help us decide what to do when faced with options
- ▶ help us analyze moral issues

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## Golden Rule

- ▶ “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

### counterexample

- ▶ I'm a software developer.
- ▶ I don't mind others copying and distributing my works without my permission.
- ▶ So I can copy and distribute other people's works without their permission.

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## Utilitarianism

### utilitarianism

morally permissible:  
consequences produce  
greatest amount of good

- ▶ consequence based



Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

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## Utilitarianism Problem Example

- ▶ I enter a clothing store and see a shirt that I like.
- ▶ Should I steal it?
- ▶ Calculate and decide.
- ▶ I go out, enter another store and see a tie that I like.
- ▶ Should I steal it?
- ▶ ...

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## Utilitarianism

### act utilitarianism

Act so that more people  
will be happier.

### rule utilitarianism

Act so that more people  
would be happier  
if everyone acted that way.

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## Utilitarianism Problem Examples

### act utilitarianism

- ▶ “kill one person and save ten using his organs”
- ▶ “make 1% of the society work as slaves for the other 99%”

### rule utilitarianism

- ▶ “making 1% of the society work as slaves would cause unrest”

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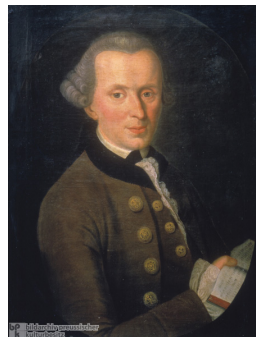
## Critique of Utilitarianism

- ▶ morality tied to happiness or pleasure
- ▶ consequence of action not known beforehand: *moral luck*
- ▶ not helpful for decisions
- ▶ how to do the utilitarian calculus?
- ▶ fair distribution of good outcomes?

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## Deontology

- ▶ intuition is sufficient to seek happiness
- ▶ capacity of reasoning is what separates humans from animals
- ▶ this capacity creates a moral duty
- ▶ duty based



Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

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## Categorical Imperative

### categorical imperative

- ▶ Never treat others merely as a means to an end.
- ▶ Act always on that rule that can be universally binding, without exception, for all human beings.
- ▶ what if duties conflict?

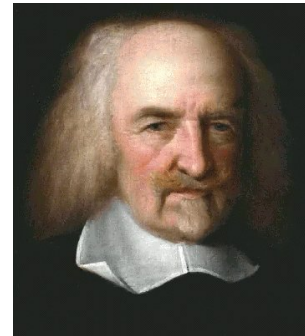
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## Categorical Imperative Example

- ▶ slavery is wrong because:
- ▶ a group of people would be treated as a means to an end
- ▶ people wouldn't want this to be an impartial, universal rule

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## Social Contract Theory



Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

- ▶ premoral state:  
everyone acts to satisfy  
their own needs
- ▶ there is a sense of freedom  
but also a constant threat
- ▶ we surrender some of  
our freedom to a sovereign
- ▶ contract based

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## Critique of Social Contract Theory

- ▶ if there is no contract, there is no moral issue
- ▶ nobody has to help anybody
- ▶ what is illegal is not necessarily morally wrong

example: race discrimination laws

- ▶ USA, South Africa (apartheid)
- ▶ is it wrong to disobey these laws?

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## Rights

- ▶ **negative** rights:  
not to be interfered with

examples

- ▶ voting
- ▶ higher education

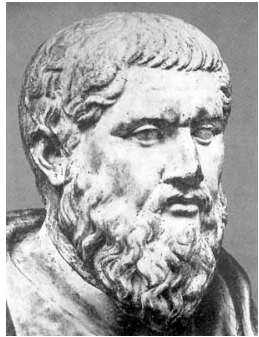
- ▶ **positive** rights:  
supported by society

examples

- ▶ basic education
- ▶ health care?

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## Virtue Ethics



Platon (4th century B.C.)

- ▶ acquire good character traits
- ▶ not “what should I do in this case”  
but “what kind of a person should I be”
- ▶ character based

## References

Required Reading: Tavani

- ▶ Chapter 2: **Ethical Concepts and Ethical Theories**