

Computer Ethics (English)

BLG412E

2: Philosophical ethics & ethical theories

Content

Preliminaries

- Features of a moral system.
- Barriers to philosophical ethics.

Theories:

- Virtue ethics.
- Consequentialism & utilitarianism.
- Deontological ethics.
- Social contract.
- Rights-based approaches.

Philosophical ethics studies moral systems

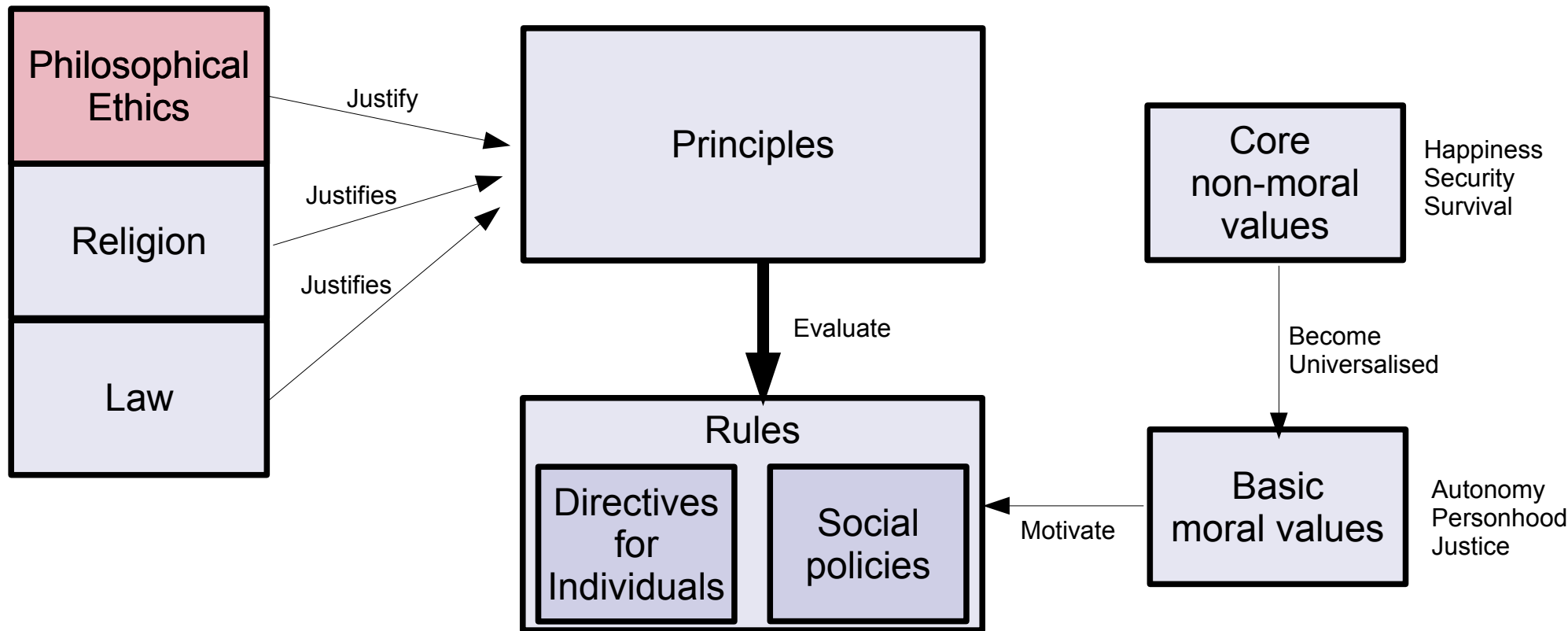
Philosophical Ethics

The application of reason to the study of normative considerations and particularly moral systems.

Features of a moral system:

- **Public:** Everybody knows it.
- **Not enforced** ("informal"): Not policed.
- **Rational:** Accessible through reason.
- **Impartial:** Applied the same to everyone.

Moral systems: rules of conduct & principles governing them.



"Discussion stoppers" 1: People disagree

Core argument: Even ethicists don't agree, so why study ethics?

Response:

1. Computer Scientists don't know if $P=NP$.
Give up on Computer Science?
2. Sometimes ethicists do agree.
3. Sometimes the problem is a matter of examination or data -- and not of first principles.

Take-home message:

It is important enough to strive for agreement.

"Discussion stoppers" 2: I've no right

Core argument: It is not my right to judge other people.

Response: We make judgements all the time already. Let us do it deliberately.

Take-home message:

More awareness can only be better.

"Discussion stoppers" 3: Morality is a private matter

Core argument: Individuals make moral decisions, so individuals decide what is right.

Response:

1. Justification for morality is found in universality.
2. Everybody's choices affect everybody else.

Take-home message:

Even lack of a decision is a decision.

"Discussion stoppers" 4:

Morality is culturally relative

Core argument: Different cultures have different beliefs.

Response:

1. Justification is found in universality.
2. Everybody's choices affect everybody else.

Take-home message:

However, your "universal" truth may be culturally rooted too.

→ Tolerance of other cultures' and individuals' choices may a good instinct.

The dark side of philosophical ethics

- "Pure reason" hard to find.
- Cultural, political, psychological (and technological) factors affect:
 - What we are aware of.
 - What we think about.
 - The kind of reasoning we use.
- Take care of teleological reasoning:
 - "It ought to be like this because it is like this".
e.g. Aristotle's view on slavery.
- Armchair ethics.
 - Academic discourse delaying action.

"Everything is politics" – *Thomas Mann*

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Virtue ethics

- Cultivate good character.
- Not "what should I do"? but "what kind of a person should I be?"
 - Honesty, wisdom, fortitude, justice, prudence,...
- Be your ethics!

The big names: Plato, Aristotle

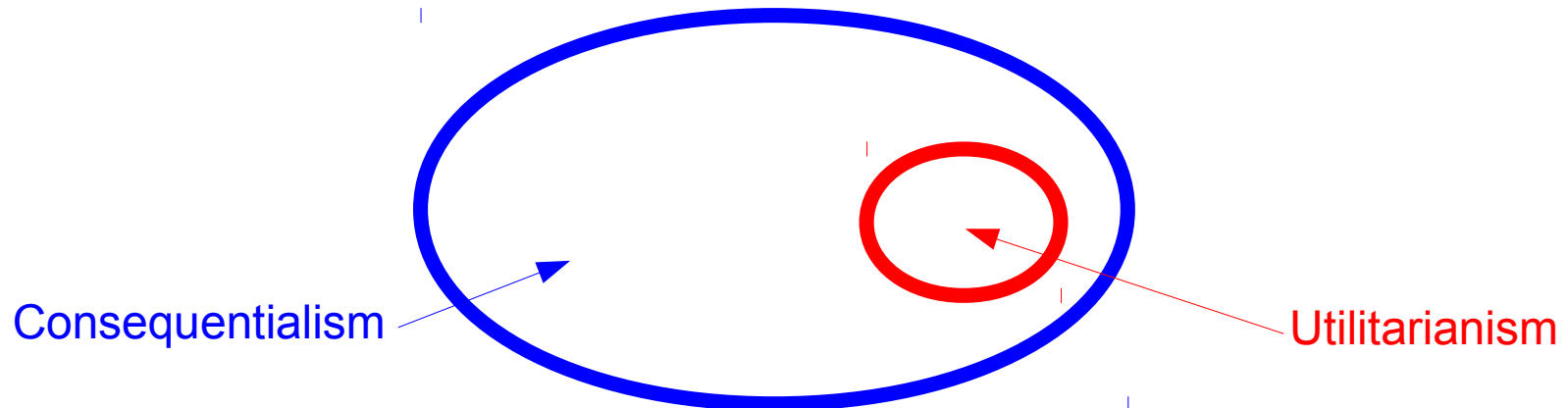
Utilitarianism & Consequentialism

Utilitarianism

Act to improve the well-being of as many as possible.

Consequentialism

Actions chosen with respect to known or predicted consequences.



The big names: Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Peter Singer

Two kinds of utilitarianism

Act utilitarianism

Act so as to improve the well-being of as many people as possible.

BUT: Enslave 1% to make the 99% happy.

Rule utilitarianism

Choose universal rules for action so as to maximise well-being.

Slavery leads to negative social consequences.

Aristotle: the only objective physical sign of rightness is happiness.

Issues with utilitarianism.

- Tied to happiness/suffering:
 - Biologically/socially/psychologically problematic.
- **Moral luck.**
- Doesn't help much with decisions.
- Nothing about justice.

Deontological ethics

- The only thing that distinguishes us from animals is the will to act with reason.
- We have a duty to act according to our reason.

Categorical Imperative

First formulation

Act according to rules that could be universal without contradiction.

Second formulation

The human will itself is the only end and should never be a means.

Third formulation

Act such that all the possible ends would be harmonized.

The big names: Immanuel Kant, Thomas Nagel

Deontological ethics

example: slavery

Slavery is bad because it uses people's intellect as a **means** rather than an **end**.

Slavery could not be universally applied.

Criticisms of deontological ethics

What if two duties contradict?

- Promised to meet a friend, obliged to help a different friend?
- Lie to stop a murderer?

(Kant claimed he resolved this one – how?)

The justification is a bit circular.

- Will itself is not the end, but aspects of it.
 - E.g. its existence.

Moral catastrophes allowed.

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Social Contract Theory

The life of "**pre-moral man**" is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (Hobbes).

So: Sacrifice some freedoms and establish a legal code.

- Also, a state.
- Get new freedoms from the contract.

The big names: Thomas Hobbes, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Rawls

Criticisms of the social contract theory

- Does not apply to non-contracted parts of life.
 - Are you obliged to help someone?
- Should breaking the law be breaking morality?
 - Civil disobedience to improve the system (e.g. anti-slavery marches).

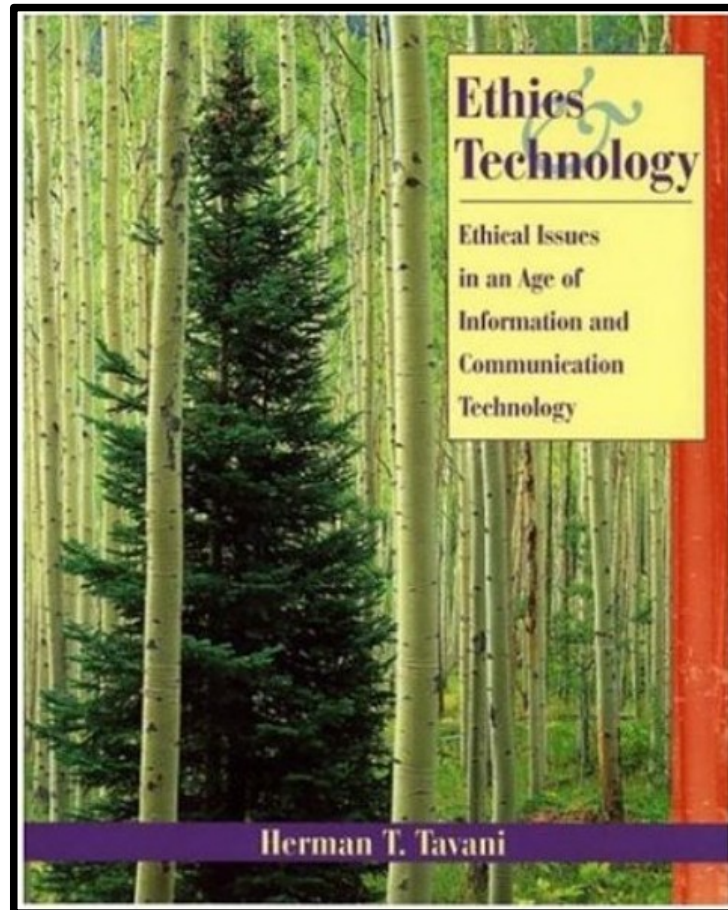
A Theory of Justice



- Rather than pre-moral man, consider:
 - Original position.
 - Veil of ignorance.
- Leads to these principles:
 - 1) Maximise minimum level of civil liberty (-ve rights).
 - Vote without restriction.
 - 2) Maximise minimum level of material wealth (+ve rights) & equality of opportunity.
 - Right to basic education.

Reading:

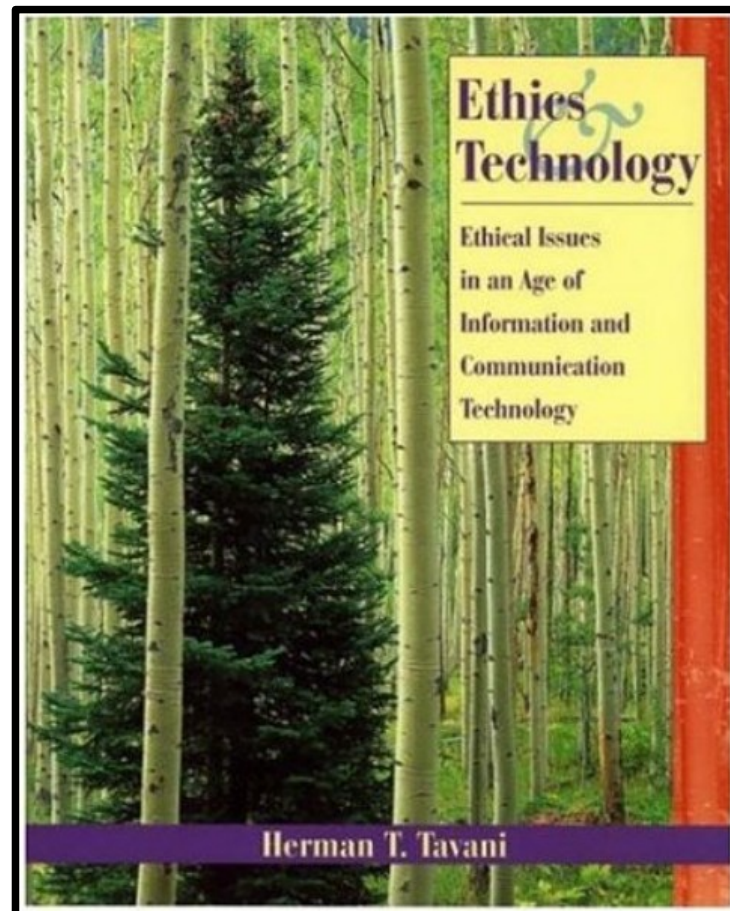
Tavani Chapter 2: Ethical Concepts and Ethical Theories



2

Reading for next lecture::

Tavani Chapter 4: Professional Ethics, Codes of Conduct, and Moral Responsibility



4

Take-home question

Choose one ethical framework to evaluate this situation:

A problem arises in a computer system I sell that I could've foreseen. I sell the fix as a “feature request” to my client.

Virtue Ethics

Utilitarianism/Consequentialism

Deontological Ethics

Social Contract

Theory of Justice

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