Computer Ethics

Normative Ethics

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- **Descriptive ethics** is the branch of ethics describing existing morality, including customs and habits, opinions about good and evil, responsible and irresponsible behavior, and acceptable and unacceptable action

- **Normative ethics** is the branch of ethics judging morality and trying to formulate normative recommendations about how to act or live

- Do the norms and values actually used conform to our ideas about how people should behave?

Different kinds of ethical justification

- Counting the consequences - **utilitarianism**

- Doing one's duties **– duty ethics**

- Being a good person – **virtue ethics**

- Brotherhood and sisterhood - **communitarianism**

- Live free or die – **libertarianism**

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- **Normative relativism** argues that all moral points of view – all values, norms, and virtues – are equally valid

  - Problems: it seems to involve an inherent **contradiction** (there are no universal norms, but at the same time it uses a universal norm); it make any meaningful **moral discussion** totally **impossible**

- **Universalism** states that there is a system of norms and values that is **universally applicable** to everyone, independent of time, place, or culture

- **Absolutism** is a rigid form of universalism in which no exceptions to rules are possible

  - Difficult to work with a universal norm valid for all situations; **no answer for conflicting norms**; no room for **independent moral judgment**

- Type of **consequentialism** (consequences of action are central to the moral judgment of those actions) based on utility principle

- Actions are judged by the amount of **pleasure** and **pain** they bring about

- The actions that bring the **greatest happiness** for the **greatest number** should be chosen (**maximization**)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRPE0IImxzs

Historical roots: Bentham

- Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)
  - **Hedonism** as the idea that 'pleasure' is the only thing that is good in itself and to which all other things are instrumental
  - Utility principle for which one should choose those actions that result in the **greatest happiness** for the **greatest number**
  - **Moral balance sheet** in which the **costs** and **benefits** for each possible action are weighted against each other

Criticism of utilitarianism
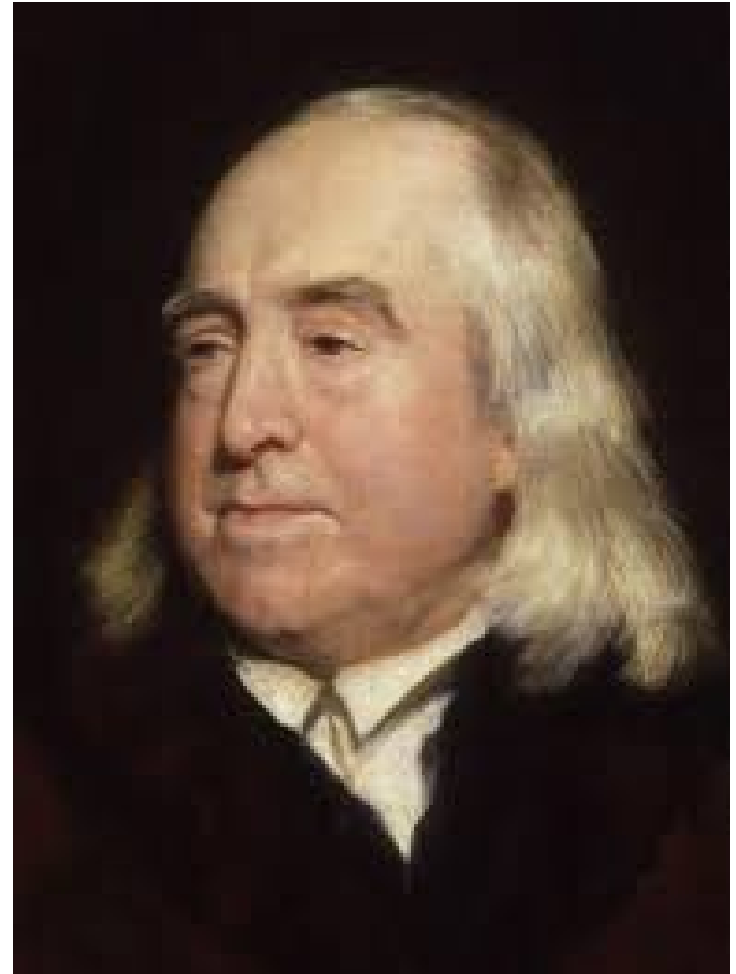
- Happiness cannot be **measured objectively**

- Utilitarianism can lead to **exploitation**

- Consequences cannot be foreseen objectively and often are **unpredictable**

- Utilitarianism can lead to an **unjust division** of **costs** and **benefits** (against distributive justice)

- Utilitarianism **ignores** the **personal relationships** between people (only the total happiness counts)

- Certain actions are **morally acceptable** even if they do not create pleasure and some actions that **maximize pleasure** are **morally unacceptable**

- Also known as **deontological ethics**

- The class of approaches in ethics in which an **action** is considered **morally right** if it is in **agreement** with a certain **moral rule**

- These rules

  - Can be given by **God** (such as in the Bible or the Koran)

  - Make appeal to a **social contract** that the involved parties have implicitly agreed to (e.g., a company code)

  - Are based on **reasonable arguments**

KANT'S ETHICAL THEORY

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-UhiRLuSlIU

- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) rejects the idea that moral laws are based on happiness and proposes **duty**

- **Categorical imperative** is a universal principle of the form "Do A" which is the **foundation** of all the moral judgments in Kant's view

Kant's moral principles

- **Universality principle** is the first formulation of the categorical imperative

  "Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law"

- **Reciprocity principle** is the second formulation of the categorical imperative

  "Act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end, never as a means only"
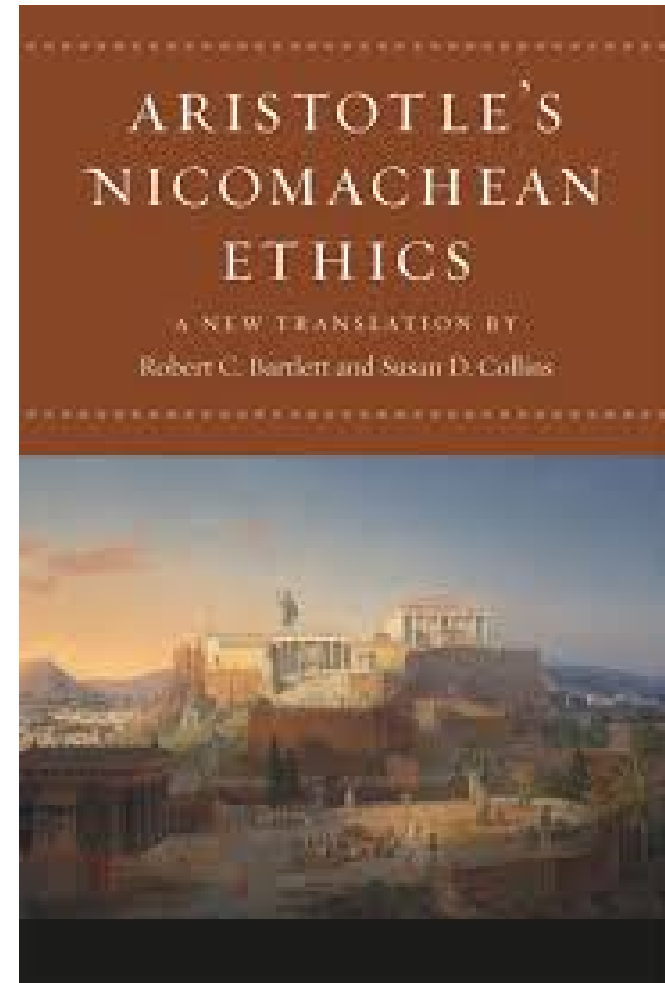
- **Free will** of all rational beings is the fundamental ground of human rights

  - **Equality postulate** as the prescription to treat persons as equals (with equal concern and respect)

- **Rationality** at the **core** of **morality**

- By stressing the **rational nature** of **humans** as free, intelligent, self-directing beings, **Kant** stresses that we must not merely use them as means to our selfish ends

  - To use people is to **disrespect their humanity**

- Ex.: to borrow money from someone by knowing that I will not be able to pay it back but while promising that I will do

Criticism of Kantian theory

- Is it our duty always clear?

- If all moral laws can be derived from the categorical imperative, the question arises whether all these laws form an **unambiguous** and **consistent system** of norms

  - To save one friend by lying

- A rigid adherence to moral rules can make people blind to the potentially **very negative consequences** of their actions

  - A case of child labor (more harm than good)

- It is an ethical theory that focuses on the **nature** of the **acting person**. This theory indicates which good or desirable characteristics people should have or develop to be moral

  - **Aristotle** (384-322 BC) and *eudamonia* (the good life): a state of being in which one realizes one's uniquely human potential (the state of being a good person)

  - Moral virtue is the middle course between two extremes of evil

  - **Practical wisdom** is the intellectual virtue enabling one to make the right choice of action and consisting in the ability to choose the right mean between two vices

ARISTOTLE'S NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

A NEW TRANSLATION BY Robert C. Bartlett and Susan D. Collins

https://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/glossary/virtue-ethics

- The focus shifted **from individual choices** or **decisions** made by people in challenging situations **to** the **enduring character** of moral agent

  - 'How shall I be ?'

  - 'What sort of life should I lead?'

Virtues

- Certain type of human characteristics or qualities

- **Moral virtues** (justice, honesty, courage, loyalty, creativity, …) are desirable characteristics of people – those that make people good

- **Intellectual virtues** focus on knowledge and skills

- Many moral virtues are also values (integrity)

  - But the notion of virtue mainly refers to the character development someone has to have gone through to truly realize those values
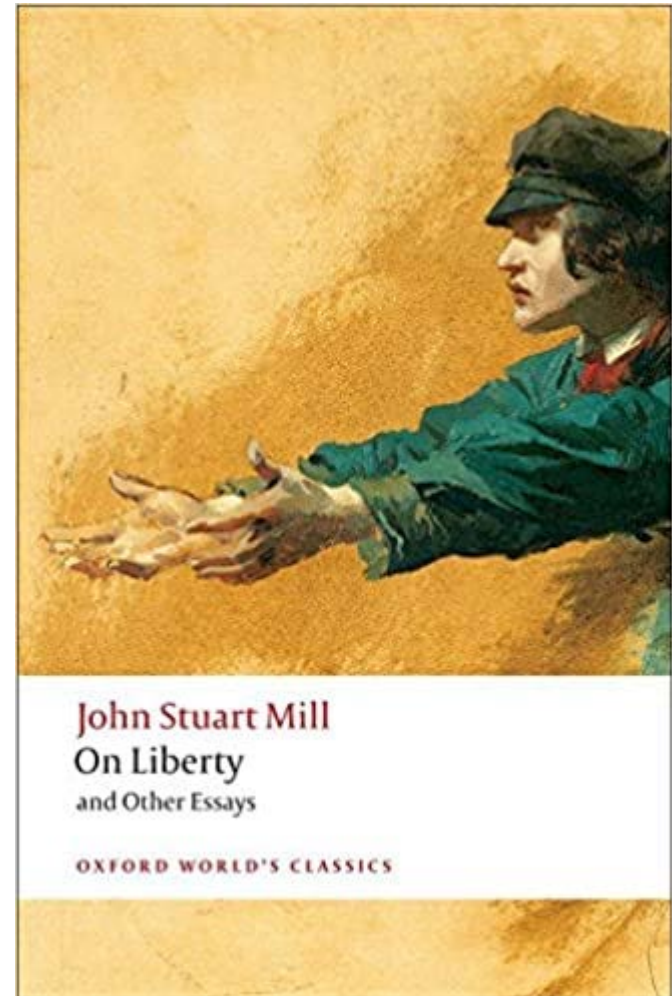
The issues of virtue ethics

- Virtue ethics does **not** give **concrete clues** about how to act while solving a case, but does facilitate **responsible action**

- **Utopian** view

- Risk of the **imposition** of **values**
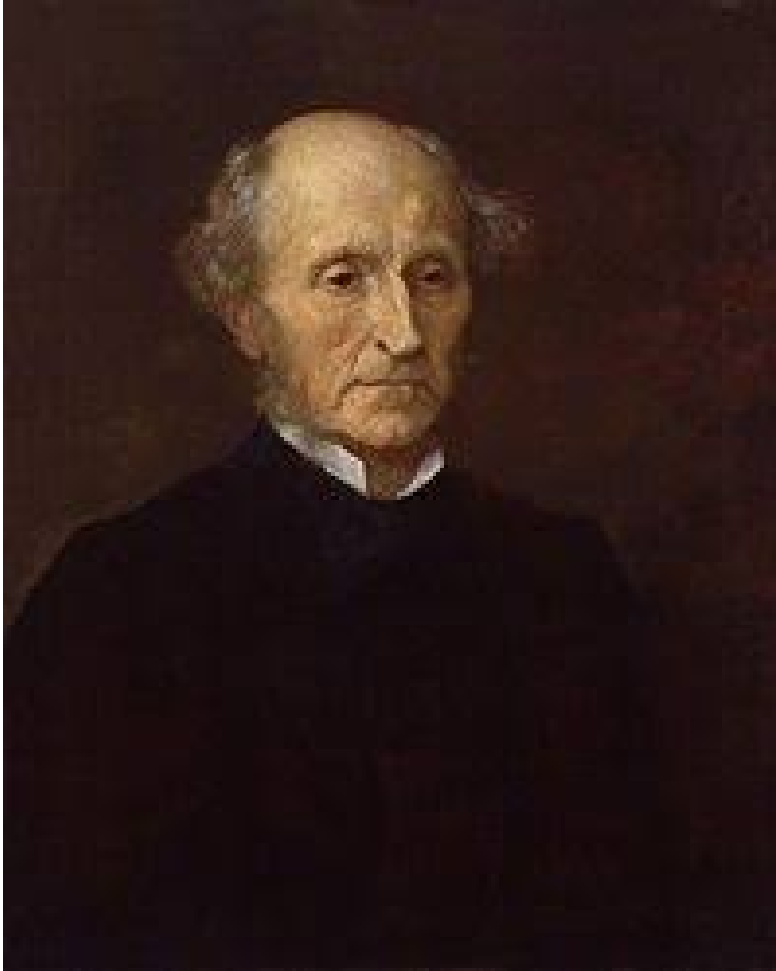
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Communitarism

- **Actions** and **decisions** of **individuals** are the main criterion to assure the **good** of **society**

- Our **freedom** to choose and to act is both **constrained** and **enabled** by the **society**

- Stressing the **social dimension** of our potential solutions, but **not providing** the **comprehensive** moral **theories**

- Thinking about **morality** in its **social context** and not regard it as merely a question of individual choice

- Issue: threat to individuality

- Stressing the **freedom** of the **individual** from social control

- Strict **limits** on the extent to which the **state** or **society** can encroach upon the choices and decisions of the individual

- Non-interference

John Stuart Mill
On Liberty
and Other Essays

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS

Historical roots: Stuart Mill

- John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) *On Liberty*

  - **Freedom principle** (no **harm principle**) as the moral principle that everyone is free to strive for his/her pleasure, as long as they do not deny the pleasure of others

Values

- Values are lasting convictions or matters that people feel should be strived for **in general** and not just for themselves to be able to lead a **good life** or to realize a **fair society**

  - "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*": slogan not expressing a personal preference, but values felt to be of importance for everyone

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A balancing act

- Helping to formulate **relevant questions** but not providing answers to specific dilemmas

- **Ethics** as a **process**

  - Awareness of the moral issues at stakes in each different situations

  - Drawing on the richness of the different moral theories available to us

- Are we justified in overruling individual choice in these circumstances for the sake of a more just outcome?

- Which decision will create the best ratio of benefit to harm to those affected?

- What is our duty in this situation and how does it relate to the fundamental values of our society, such as respect for the rights of all persons?

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- van de Poel, I. and Royakkers, L. (2011). *Ethics, Technology, and Engineering*, Wiley-Blackwell (Chapter 3)