

Introduction to Ethics

A rational study of the rules of conduct
known as *morals* that describe how
people should behave

Ethical Theories

- Subjective Relativism
- Cultural Relativism
- Divine Command Theory
- Kantianism
- Act Utilitarianism
- Rule Utilitarianism
- Social Contract Theory

Subjective Relativism

- There are no universal moral norms of right and wrong
- All persons decide right and wrong for themselves
- Pros:
 - Well meaning people can have opposite opinions
 - Opposing views do not need to be reconciled
 - Unpleasant debates are avoided

Cons of Subjective Relativism

- Can be used to rationalize bad behavior
- Morality becomes meaningless
 - Anything can be called moral
- Tolerance becomes meaningless
 - Anything can be tolerated even intolerance
- Ethical decisions don't have to be based on reason

Cultural Relativism

- The ethical theory that what's right or wrong depends on place and/or time
- Pros:
 - Different social contexts determine different moral guidelines
 - One society should not judge another by its own standards
 - The actual behavior of a society reflects its values better than what it says

Cons of Cultural Relativism

- Different views of right and wrong are not always acceptable
 - Just because they exist doesn't make them okay
- Cultural relativism can be vague and subject to different interpretations
- There are no guidelines for reconciliation between cultures in conflict
- Cultures have to share many “core values”

Divine Command Theory

- Good actions are aligned with the will of God
- Bad actions are contrary to the will of God
- The holy book helps make the decisions
- Pros:
 - We owe obedience to God, our creator
 - God is all good and all knowing
 - God is the ultimate authority

Cons of Divine Command Theory

- There are many holy books that disagree with each other
- In a multicultural society it's unrealistic to adopt a religion based morality
- Some moral problems are not mentioned in the holy books
- Equating “good” with “God” is the “equivalence fallacy” (trying to equate two things that are similar)
- Divine Command Theory is not based on reason

Kantianism

- Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) a German philosopher
- People's wills should be based on moral rules
- Therefore it's important that our actions are based on appropriate moral rules.
- To determine when a moral rule is appropriate Kant proposed two *Categorical Imperatives*

First Formulation of the Categorical Imperative

- *Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time universalize.*
 - If you act on a moral rule that would cause problems if everyone followed it then your actions are not more

Second Formulation of the Categorical Imperative

- *Act so that you always treat both yourself and other people as ends in themselves, and never only as a means to an end.*
 - If you use people for your own benefit that is not moral

Pros of Kantianism

- It's *rational*, i.e. people can use logic to determine if the reason for their actions meet one of the Categorical Imperatives
- It produces universal moral guidelines
- All people are moral equals and deserve to be treated similarly

Cons of Kantianism

- Sometimes a single rule is not enough
- There is no way to resolve a conflict between rules
- It allows no exceptions to moral rules
- But, is it a workable theory in spite of its weaknesses?

Criteria for a Workable Ethical Theory

- Moral decisions and rules:
- Based on logical reasoning
- Come from facts and commonly held values
- Culturally neutral
- Treat everyone equally
- These criteria are from the author and his colleagues

Act Utilitarianism

- **Principle of Utility**

(Also known as *Greatest Happiness Principle*)

- An action is *right* to the extent that it *increases* the total happiness of the affected parties
- An action is *wrong* to the extent that it *decreases* the total happiness of the affected parties.
- Happiness may have many definitions such as: advantage, benefit, good, or pleasure

Pros of Act Utilitarianism

- **It focuses on happiness**
- **It is down-to-earth**
 - It is practical
 - Well defined
- **It is comprehensive**

Cons of Act Utilitarianism

- The boundaries of an evaluation are not clear
- It is not practical
 - Too much work can go into every moral decision
- Ignores persons' innate sense of duty
 - It is consequence oriented
- It is susceptible to the problem of “moral luck”
 - The actors are not always in control of the consequences

Rule Utilitarianism

- Rules are based on the Principle of Utility
 - A rule is *right* to the extent that it *increases* the total happiness of the affected parties
 - The *Greatest Happiness Principle* is applied to moral rules
- Similar to Kantianism – both pertain to rules
 - But Kantianism uses the Categorical Imperative to decide which rules to follow

Pros of Rule Utilitarianism

- Calculating the total happiness is easier than in Act Utilitarianism
- Not every moral decision requires the utilitarian calculations
- It's easier to resolve conflicting rules
- It overrides “moral luck”
- It appeals to a large cross section of society
- Considered “workable”
 - Treats all persons as equals
 - Is rational and reasons can be given to explain why actions are good or bad

Cons of Utilitarianism

- We are forced to use the same scale or measure for all evaluations even if the consequences are completely different
 - Usually the consequences are expressed in dollars
 - But, many consequences are difficult to measure in dollars
- It ignores the unjust distribution of good consequences
 - Not all members of society may benefit equally

Social Contract Theory

- Thomas Hobbes (1603-1679) and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)
- “Morality consists in the set of rules, governing how people are to treat one another, that rational people will agree to accept, for their mutual benefit, on the condition that others follow those rules as well.”

Principles of Justice

- John Rawls (1921-2001)
- Each person may claim an adequate number of basic rights and liberties as long as everyone else has a claim to the same rights and liberties.
- Any social and economic inequalities must satisfy two conditions:
 - They are associated with positions in society that everyone has a fair and equal opportunity to assume
 - **The difference principle:** They are “to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society”

Pros of the Social Contract Theory

- It uses the language of rights
- It explains why rational people act out of self interest in the absence of a common agreement.
- It provides a clear ethical analysis of some important moral issues regarding the relationship between people and their government
- It is a “workable” theory.

Cons of Social Contract Theory

- If we don't sign the contract why should we be bound by it?
- Some actions can be characterized multiple ways.
- It does not have a way to resolve conflicting rights
- It may be unfair to those who are incapable of upholding their side of the contract.

The Four “Workable” Theories

- Kantianism
- Act Utilitarianism
- Rule Utilitarianism
- Social Contract Theory
- In spite of weaknesses all of the above pass the author’s “workable” test:
 - Ethical decision making is a rational process
 - Moral principles are found by using logical reasoning based on facts and commonly held values

Morality vs. Legal

- Are all legal acts also moral?
 - Difficult to determine because many immoral acts are not addressed by the law
- Are all illegal acts immoral?
 - Social Contract Theory: Yes, we are obligated to follow the law
 - Kantianism: Yes, by the two Categorical Imperatives
 - Rule Utilitarianism: Yes, because rules are broken
 - Act Utilitarianism: Depends on the situation.
Sometimes more good comes from breaking a law.

Comparing Workable Theories

- Kantianism and Social Contract are based on “doing the right thing”
- The Utilitarian theories are oriented towards the “consequences “ of actions
 - However, once a rule is established, Rule Utilitarianism requires strict adherence to it.
- Therefore, Kantianism, Social Contract, and Rule Utilitarianism all use moral rules to determine if an action is moral
 - Act Utilitarianism adds up the total good achieved
- Kantianism and Social Contract theory focus on the individual decision makers (The Deciders) while the Utilitarian theories focus on all affected parties.

Toolbox of Moral Theories

- Whether presented with problems that are easy or difficult to solve, the four workable theories,
 - Kantianism
 - Act Utilitarianism
 - Rule Utilitarianism
 - Social Contract Theory
- will provide us with solutions to many of the problems that arise from the introduction of Information Technology into society that we will address this semester