

Chapter 2 in the book *Ethics for the Information Age* talks about 9 ethical theories, including Subjective Relativism, Cultural Relativism, Divine Command Theory, Ethical Egoism, Kantianism, Act Utilitarianism, Rule Utilitarianism, Social Contract Theory, and Virtue Ethics, among which Act Utilitarianism, Kantianism, Rule Utilitarianism, Social Contract Theory, and Virtue Theory are considered working ethical theories. During the reading, I found three ideas of great significant.

The first idea I drew from the book is that: moral guidelines should be the result of a logical progression from a set of underlying principle. The word logical is addressed in the idea based on what theories the book concludes as “working theories” and what are not. All of the “working theories” have a logical progression when drawing conclusions on moral principles while others do not. For example, Subjective Relativism, as one of the “not working theories”, concentrates on subjective views of moral norms, without mentioning anything related to logical decision making. Thus, some fundamental flaws reside within Subjective Relativism that people are not able to accept, such as people will draw their own lines when it comes to making decision about right and wrong so a morale rule cannot be constructed. On the other hand, working theories like Kantianism, which says people should act only from moral rules that we can at the same time will to be universal moral laws [1], draws a great deal of attention to the logical process of determining whether the rule can become universal moral laws. This way a universal moral rule can be concluded using logic and Kantianism is at the same time culture neutral and treats all humans as equals. All of the working theories involves logic in a similar way.

The second idea I drew from the book’s discussion is that: none of the theories is perfect. Every theory, working or not working, has some degree of imperfection. For example, Rule Utilitarianism, which evolves from Act Utilitarianism, holds that we ought to adopt those moral rules that, if followed by everyone, lead to the greatest increase in total happiness over all affected parties [2]. This rule seems logical, calculable, and does not involve any kind of subjective. But still it suffers from some fundamental problems against it: Utilitarianism forces people to use a single scale or measure to evaluate completely different kinds of consequences [3]. Because of its calculable nature, Utilitarianism must be put into same kinds of scale whereas most of the values cannot be put into the same scale. For example, the cost of a divorce might be beneficial to all neighbors surrounding the house because of the constant fight the couple had influenced neighbors’ resting and results in working inefficiency. While we can still calculate the cost in dollars of increase working inefficiency, the cost of a divorce is not merely calculable by dollars because it involves two individual human’s emotions. Unforeseen troubles might be caused because of the divorce. This way the most rational moral rule in my opinion also has problems. This will lead to many problems. Many technical advancements nowadays may be hindered by the imperfection of morale theories greatly. For example, nobody is able to decide the moral decision of a self-driving car because there is no perfect universal moral theory guideline for that. If a self-driving car is to encounter a moral decision, then should the programmers decide what it should do? Or should the manager decide? Thus,

although the technical aspects of self-driving car are pretty mature, the publication of such a technology is obstructed by the imperfection of moral theories.

The third idea I drew from the book is that: when we are stuck, reverse roles. Reversing roles falls in Categorical Imperative's second formulation where it asks people to act so that you always treat both yourself and other people as ends in themselves, and never only as a means to an end [4]. This conforms with Confucius: Do as you would be done by others. This is me talking from my own experience. Reversing roles draws powers from great human nature of being able to empathize. What we don't want, don't do it to others. Although this principle also suffers from several problems, it is the easiest and quickest theory to perform. Usually when we have to make a moral decision, we don't have time to calculate the maximum net increase in the total good of the affected parties (Act Utilitarianism) or to simulate another virtuous person and see what would that person do (Virtue Theory). We are making a lot of moral decisions on a daily basis when dealing with our friends, strangers, professors and so on. So, this principle is easy for us as normal people to conform.

References:

- [1] Michael J. Quinn, Ethics for the Information Age, Ch2, 2.6
- [2] Michael J. Quinn, Ethics for the Information Age, Ch2, 2.7
- [3] Michael J. Quinn, Ethics for the Information Age, Ch2, 2.8
- [4] Michael J. Quinn, Ethics for the Information Age, Ch2, 2.6