Overview of Key Ethical Theories
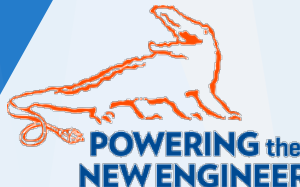
Collectively: Five Sources of Ethical Standards for Use
(Markulla Center* Reading)

- ▶ The Utilitarian Approach
  - ▶ produces the greatest balance of benefit over harm
- ▶ The Rights Approach (Duties also)
  - ▶ dutifully protects and respects the rights of all affected
- ▶ The Fairness or Justice Approach
  - ▶ treats people equally, or if unequally, proportionately & fairly
- ▶ The Common Good Approach
  - ▶ contributes most to achieving a quality common life together
- ▶ The Virtue Approach
  - ▶ embodies the habits & values of humans at their best

*The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University

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- Everybody may not agree on key aspects:
  - Who/what rights?
  - What is a "harm"
- Those may not answer the question

► Everybody may not agree on key aspects:

  ► Who/what rights?

  ► What is a "harm"

► Those may not answer the question

- **True: this is not cut-and-dried problem solving like in most engineering classes**
- **Several (or maybe all) of the theories will be considered for the issue**
- **Allows viewing ethical problems from different angles since each theory focuses on different aspects**

Theorists generally say that that the end result will frequently be the same.

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A Quick Look at Complexities
Utilitarian-Based Approach

Despite limitations in theory, approach is often found in three approaches relevant to engineering:

- Cost-benefit (risk-benefit) analysis (efforts to translate positive and negative aspects into monetary or non-monetary terms)

- Act utilitarian (will a course of action produce more good for than another option..e.g., car safety features, road improvements)

- Rule utilitarian (for example, traffic rules)

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A Quick Look at Engineering Complexities
Utilitarian-Based Approach - Example

Proposed Benefits

✓ flood control

✓ water supply

✓ energy

✓ recreation

A Quick Look at Engineering Complexities
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Proposed Benefits

✓ flood control

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✓ recreation

Potential Costs

✓ individual losses (homes, land)

✓ environmental impacts

Utilitarianism tries to balance the needs of society with individual needs, with an emphasis on what will provide the most benefit to the most people.

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A Quick Look at Engineering Complexities
Rights and Common Good Approaches - Example

Huge on-going regional issue: public water supply needs vs. potential environmental impacts on springs

A Quick Look at Engineering Complexities
Rights and Common Good Approaches - Example

Huge on-going regional issue: public water supply needs vs. potential environmental impacts on springs

Issues

✓ Rights to "reasonable beneficial uses of water"

✓ The common good for protection of unique public environmental resources

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Moral Rights

- Main distinctions in moral rights
  - human rights (those all people have)
  - special rights (those possessed only by some)
  - civil rights (legal rights of citizens)
- Alienable and inalienable rights
  - Alienable right is one that a person has but can trade away (e.g. property rights)
  - Inalienable right is one that the possessor cannot divest or trade away unless their actions result in forfeiture
- Absolute and prima facie rights
  - Absolute right can never be morally outweighed by other factors (e.g., freedom from involuntary participation in research studies)
  - Prima facie right applies unless morally outweighed by other moral considerations
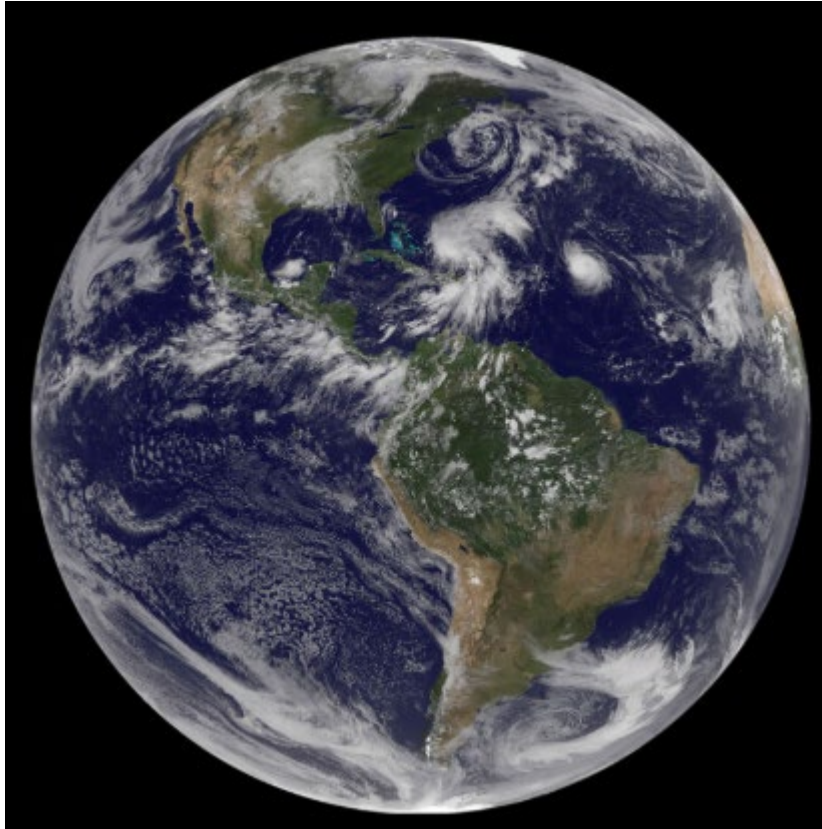
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Rights/Duties Approach...cont.

➢ Competing duties or conflicting rights (e.g., airport security)...when rights conflict, GeWirth's Heirarchy of Rights is sometimes referenced:

- 1st tier: required for existence (life/health)

- 2nd tier: maintenance of self fulfillment and achievement (e.g., right not to be cheated, possessions taken, suffer from broken promises, etc)

- 3rd tier: enhancement of self (property acquisition, self-respect, non-discrimination, achievement, etc)

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▶ Solutions often depend on knowing what will result in the "most good"

▶ Often it's difficult to predict all the consequences of an action

▶ Judgment (and some professional guesswork) are involved

▶ Commonly involves some risk that the choice might not work out as "best"

A Caution About Ethical Thoughts Covered

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