

INFO 350

Ethical Systems #3

INFO Policy, Law, and Ethics



Amazon reportedly employs thousands of people to listen to your Alexa conversations

By Jordan Valinsky, [CNN Business](#)

Updated 2:38 PM ET, Thu April 11, 2019



Amazon listening in?

- Amazon employs a global team that transcribes the voice commands captured after the wake word is detected and feeds them back into the software to help improve Alexa's grasp of human speech so it can respond more efficiently in the future...
- Amazon doesn't "explicitly" tell Alexa users that it employs people to listen to the recordings.
- People can opt out of Amazon using their voice recordings to improve the software in the privacy settings section of the Alexa app.

Issues

- Amazon claims that users consent to this and they can opt-out.
 - What does this say about the meaning of consent?
- Example of Artificial Intelligence relying a lot on humans.
 - Other examples?
 - Anything interesting or troubling about that?

Recap of ethical systems

Recap of Kantianism (aka deontology)

- Emphasis on *duty*, equal consideration, dignity
- Categorical imperative (first formulation)
 - Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws (e.g. “when I need money, I will make a lying promise).
 - Is that rational? (no, because promises would lose their meaning)
- Categorical imperative (second formulation)
 - Use others only as *ends* never as a means to an end
- Kantian shortcut:
 - Consider how you would like to be treated. Treat others the same.

Recap of Kantianism (aka deontology)

- Problems for deontology:
 - Rigid – a universal rule is always the rule (don't lie – ever!)
 - Meeting one obligation might mean violating another (hiding Jews from Nazis vs. telling the truth)
 - Many questions do not translate easily into the CI (should I burn fossil fuels?)

Recap of act utilitarianism

- Utilitarians focus on maximizing “utility” (e.g. happiness, pleasure, things that support those – like money, health, etc.)
- Reasoning through ethical problem by “calculating greatest net utility”
 - An action is good if its benefits exceeds its harms
 - An action is bad if its harms exceed its benefits
- Main problems:
 - Difficult to calculate
 - Might lead to violations of human dignity or obligations

2.8 Rule Utilitarianism

Applying Principle of Utility to Rules

- We ought to adopt **moral rules** which, if followed by everyone, will lead to the greatest increase in total happiness
- Act utilitarianism applies Principle of Utility to individual actions
- Rule utilitarianism applies Principle of Utility to moral rules

Scenario: Constitutional protections

- Every day, people accused of crimes are tried in courts of law. The US Constitution requires the “presumption of innocence” which means that law enforcement and prosecutors must meet a high standard of evidence to get a conviction, otherwise, the defendant goes free.
- As a result, the court system is considered trustworthy. Innocent people who the police don’t like avoid being railroaded into prison on false charges, but the risk is that many guilty people may also go free on “technicalities.”

Evaluation using Rule Utilitarianism

Proposed rule: High standard of evidence
(presumption of innocence)

- Who would benefit
 - The accused, guilty **and** innocent who get fair trials
 - Society – because the justice system meets a standard of fairness
- Who would be harmed
 - Future defendants whose trials are less fair
 - Society – because trust in the system would decrease
- Conclusion:
 - Benefit outweighs harm, keep the rule

Hippocratic oath

- “First, do no harm.”
- Who benefits? Who loses?
- What’s a scenario that “tests” this commitment?

Case for Rule Utilitarianism

- Preserves the positive aspects of utilitarianism (practical, flexible)
- Not every moral decision requires performing utilitarian calculus
- Moral rules survive exceptional situations (dictators in the emergency room)
- Reduces the problem of bias

Problems for Utilitarianism

- The problem of choosing a measure of utility
 - Some can be self-serving or anti-social – e.g. deriving pleasure from suffering
- The problem of obligations – are all obligations equal?
 - Don't we have obligations to our families and friends that outweigh strangers?
 - Don't we have obligations to fulfill our promises?
- The problem of an unjust distribution of good consequences
 - What happens when a conflict arises between the Principle of Utility and a principle of justice?
 - Kill one innocent person to save 20? 200? 2,000,000?
 - Seize your house and land so your neighbors can have a park?
- Conclusion: Despite weaknesses, both act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism are workable ethical theories

Theory	Emphasis	Distinctions
Kantian / Deontology	Rules based on “rightness.” Obligations, dignity, equal consideration of persons	What is right is more important than consequences
Act Utilitarianism / Consequentialism	Goodness of consequences	Every action calculated for greatest “net utility”
Rule Utilitarianism	Goodness of consequences <i>overall</i>	Rules or principles to produce greatest net utility overall
Social Contract	Rules (like Kant) based on what people will/would agree to	Emphasis on rights. Some things are not negotiable
Virtue Ethics	Character, developing one’s “excellences”	Rather than rules or calculations, a virtuous person develops the character to act well

Real World Ethics

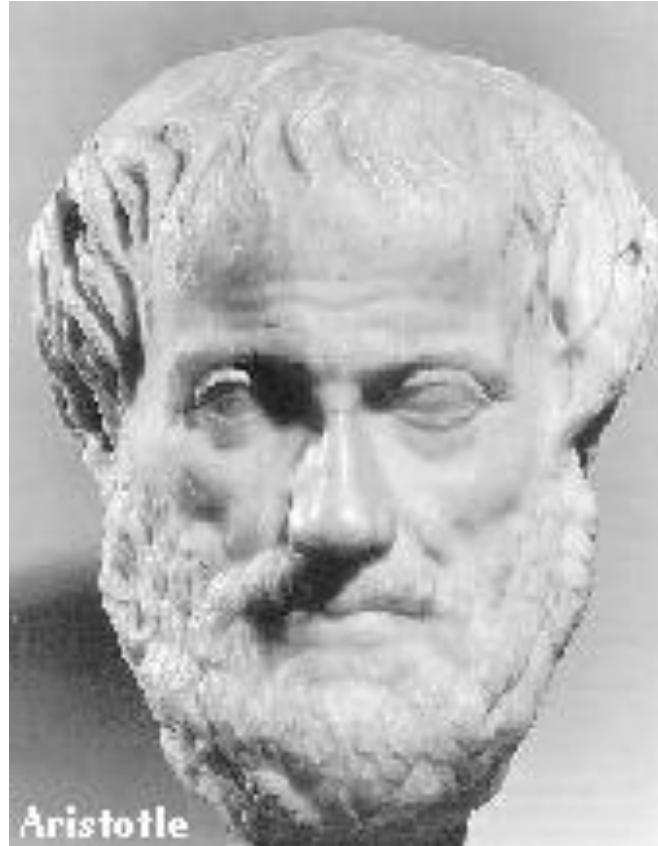
- How does law enforcement work?
- The cop on the street is a deontologist: if she sees you doing a crime, she will cite or arrest you (usually).
- The police chief, however, is a consequentialist: I have x number of police officers, I can only target a certain number of crimes, neighborhoods, nuisances, etc.
- Government policy seems often to be a giant utility calculation, while political rhetoric is deontological –
 - e.g. some politicians say that breaking immigration laws is always wrong, but not all immigration laws are enforced in practice.

2.10 Virtue Ethics

Aristotle

384—322 B.C.

- Student of Plato
- Tutor of Alexander the Great
- Systematic – wrote on politics, biology, logic, poetry, physics, etc.



Aristotle's Ethics

For Aristotle the question was not:

“How should I act?”, but

“What kind of a person should I be?”

Aristotle: Happiness derives from living a life of virtue.



Basic Assumptions

- Every activity aims at some end
 - “the end of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth.”
- Politics has an end: “human flourishing”
- Different “Sciences” will have different levels of precision.
 - Some will be more precise than others
 - Ethics will not be as precise as mathematics.

Virtue

- A human excellence which can be realized in distinctively human (rational) activity
- Virtues are acquired by habituation
- Virtue is a state of character
- To be genuinely virtuous: "The agent also must be in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes and thirdly his actions must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character."

Summary of Virtue Ethics

A right action is an action that a virtuous person, acting in character, would do in the same circumstances.

A virtuous person is a person who possesses and lives out the virtues.

The virtues are those character traits human beings needs in order to flourish and be truly happy.

Virtue

- Moral virtue arises out of habit
 - Moral Virtues are not innate – they are created through habit and imitation
 - Just like other skills: We learn by doing—we become good builders by building, good guitar-players by playing.
 - Morally: “ We become just by doing just acts, temperate by doing temperate acts, brave by doing brave acts.”
- To become a good neighbor, practice neighborliness.
- To become generous, one practice generosity.
- To become patient, practice patience.

The Doctrine of the Mean

The correct measure of moral virtue is not the total achievement of some target virtue – beware of excess as much as defect.

Analogy with eating: both excess and deficiency both destroy health; the right eating promotes health

Consider “bravery:” Being not brave at all makes one a coward. Being *too* brave, makes one a reckless fool.

The goal is to find the *mean* of bravery

Moral Virtues

Defect	Mean	Excess
Cowardice	Bravery	Rashness
Meanness	Liberality	Prodigality
Undue humility	Proper pride	Empty vanity
Quarrelsome	Good tempered	Obsequious
Bashful	Modest	Shamelessness

Vices

- Vices are opposite of virtues
- Vice: a character trait that prevents a human being from flourishing or being truly happy
- Often, a virtue situated between two vices
 - Courage between cowardliness and rashness
 - Generosity between stinginess and prodigality

Case for Virtue Ethics

- It often makes more sense to focus on virtues than obligations, rights, or consequences
- Personal relationships can be morally relevant to decision making
- Theory recognizes our moral decision-making skills develop over time
- With this theory there are no irresolvable moral dilemmas
- Emotions play an important role in living a moral life

Case Against Virtue Ethics

- Reasonable people may disagree on character traits needed for human flourishing
- Cannot use virtue ethics to guide government policy
- Virtue ethics undermines attempts to hold people responsible for their bad actions
- Conclusion: Despite weaknesses, virtue ethics a workable theory

2.9 Social Contract Theory

Basis of Social Contract Theory

- Thomas Hobbes
 - In a “state of nature” our lives would be “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short”
 - We *implicitly* accept a social contract
 - Establishment of moral rules to govern relations among citizens
 - Government capable of enforcing these rules
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau
 - In ideal society, no one above rules
 - That prevents society from enacting bad rules

James Rachels's Definition

“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.”

Kinds of Rights

- Negative right: A right that another can guarantee by leaving you alone
- Positive right: A right obligating others to do something on your behalf
- Absolute right: A right guaranteed without exception
- Limited right: A right that may be restricted based on the circumstances

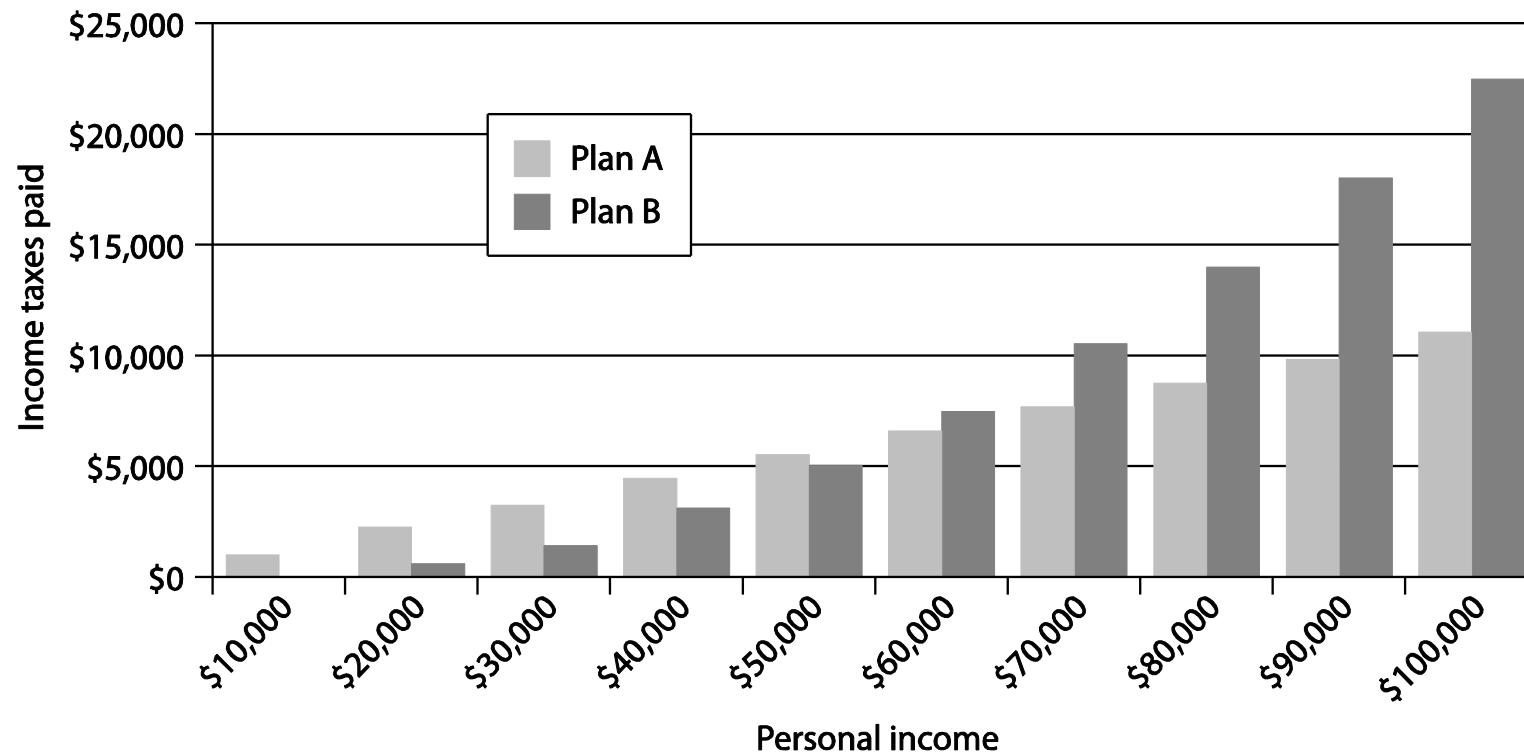
Negative rights

- Most constitutional rights are *negative rights*
- First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.”

John Rawls's Principles of Justice

- Each person may claim a “fully adequate” number of basic rights and liberties, so long as these claims are consistent with everyone else having a claim to the same rights and liberties
- Any social and economic inequalities must
 - Be associated with positions that everyone has a fair and equal opportunity to achieve
 - Be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle)

Rawls's Difference Principle



Scenario: Amazon listens to Alexa chatter

- Amazon pays thousands of people to listen to Alexa voice commands.
- Notification contained in extremely long and detailed Terms of Service
- Public statements indicate that the information is only used to train the AI, but ToS suggests they could do whatever they want with it
- When news gets out, public outcry over privacy invasion

Evaluation (Social Contract Theory)

- Consider rights and interests of Amazon and Alexa owners
- Does Amazon have a legitimate interest in accessing this information and did they provide adequate notice?
- Do Alexa users have a legitimate interest in keeping this information private and do they feel adequately notified?
- If Amazon and Alexa users agree that their interests are sufficiently protected, then Amazon has done nothing wrong.
- If Alexa users had reason to believe they were not properly informed and that their interests are at risk, then Amazon may have done something wrong.

Case for Social Contract Theory

- Framed in language of rights
- Explains why people act in self-interest in absence of common agreement
 - Pursuit of individual interests, within acceptable limits, okay
- Provides clear analysis of certain citizen/government problems
 - Why okay for government to pursue military objectives, but not citizens
 - Why okay for government to deprive criminals of certain rights
 - Why civil obedience can be morally right action

Case Against Social Contract Theory

- No one signed social contract
- Some actions have multiple characterizations
- Conflicting rights problem – how do we work out differences?
- Conclusion: Despite weaknesses, a workable theory

Table of Ethical Theories

Theory	Emphasis	Distinctions
Kantian / Deontology	Rules based on “rightness.” Obligations, dignity, equal consideration of persons	What is right is more important than consequences
Act Utilitarianism / Consequentialism	Goodness of consequences	Every action calculated for greatest “net utility”
Rule Utilitarianism	Goodness of consequences <i>overall</i>	Rules or principles to produce greatest net utility overall
Social Contract	Rules (like Kant) based on what people will/would agree to	Emphasis on rights. Some things are not negotiable
Virtue Ethics	Character, developing one’s “excellences”	Rather than rules or calculations, a virtuous person develops the character to act well