INFO 350

Ethical Systems - 2

Info Policy, Law, Ethics…

Social media crackdown

https://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/episodes/social-media/10982254?jwsource=cl

Ethical Systems

The Trolley Problem

Deontology, Consequentialism, Virtue Ethics

Deontology (aka "Kantianism")

- "Deontology" comes from Greek word for *duty*

- **Immanuel Kant** (eighteenth century)
  - Ethical action is determined by focusing on the rightness of the act itself. Intent matters more than predicted consequences.
  - Act according to one's duties and obligations to others using rules based in rationality.
  - Consequences are irrelevant when determining right and wrong actions and policies.
  - Obligation (duty) based on *reason*

Deontology

- **Kant: "There is nothing that is unconditionally good except a *good will*."**

- Many things appear to be good, but they are corruptible or corrupting.

- They can be misused or enjoyed by the undeserving
  - -Wealth seems to be good but many who deserve wealth do not have it.
  - -Wealth can be used to oppress others
  - -Health seems good but bad people can be healthy.

Critical Importance of Good Will

- Good will: the desire to do the right thing

- Reason should cultivate desire to do right thing

Deontology

- **What is a "good will?"**
  - A good will is one that acts <u>for the sake of duty</u>
- Example: the honest shopkeeper
  - Why not cheat the customers?
  - It is not enough to refrain from cheating because of consequences (bad reputation, lost business, etc.)
  - The shopkeeper should deal honestly **because it is the right thing to do.**
- How do we determine the right thing to do?

Deontology

- Kant proposed the "**categorical imperative**."
  - A rule for determining whether an action is right
  - Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws.

- Categorical Imperative #1
  - "**Act only on that maxim which you can <u>will</u> to be a universal law.**"
  - Act as if, through your action, the maxim of your act (your action as a rule) would be universally followed.

Deontology:

- **Categorical**: for all persons at all times
- **Imperative**: must be followed, no exceptions!

1. Consider an action and conceive as it a "maxim" – a rule
2. Imagine if your maxim were to be followed by all persons at all times.
3. Is it rational that this maxim could become a universal law?

Illustration of 1st Formulation

- Question: Can a person in dire straits make a promise with the intention of breaking it later?

- Proposed rule: "I may make promises with the intention of later breaking them."

- The person in trouble wants his promise to be believed so he can get what he needs.

- Universalize rule: Everyone may make & break promises

- Everyone breaking promises would make promises unbelievable, contradicting desire to have promise believed

- The rule is flawed. The answer to the question is "No."

Another Way to Reason It Out

- Question: Can I make a promise with the intention of breaking it later?

- I want my false promise to be believed.

- In order for my false promised to be believable, I want everyone except myself to be truthful all the time.

- In other words, I want to <u>privilege</u> my needs and desires over those of everyone else.

- Contradiction between what I want to do and what I want others to do.

- Therefore, what I am considering doing is wrong.

A Quick Check

- When evaluating a proposed action, reverse roles

- What would you think if that person did the same thing to you?

- Negative reaction $\rightarrow$ evidence that your will to do that action violates the Categorical Imperative

Categorical Imperative (2nd Formulation)

Act so that you treat both yourself
and other people as ends in themselves
and never only as a means to an end.

This is usually an easier formulation to work
with than the first formulation of the
Categorical Imperative.

Kant: Wrong to Use Another Person Solely as a Means to an End

Plagiarism Scenario

- Carla
  - Single mother
  - Works full time
  - Takes two evening courses/semester

- History class
  - Requires more work than normal
  - Carla earning an "A" on all work so far
  - Carla doesn't have time to write final report

- Carla purchases report; submits it as her own work

In-Lecture Activity: April 11th (part 1)
- Construct BOTH categorical imperatives for Carla's dilemma

Kantian Evaluation (1ˢᵗ Formulation)

- Carla wants credit for plagiarized report
- Rule: "You may claim credit for work performed by someone else"
- If rule universalized, reports would no longer be credible indicator's of student's knowledge, and professors would not give credit for reports
- Proposal moral rule is self-defeating
- It is wrong for Carla to turn in a purchased report

Kantian Evaluation (2nd Formulation)

- Carla submitted another person's work as her own

- She attempted to deceive professor

- She treated professor as a means to an end
    - End: passing the course
    - Means: manipulate professor

- What Carla did was wrong

Case for Kantianism

- Treats all persons as moral equals
- Gives all people moral worth as rational, autonomous beings
    - (emphasis on *dignity*)
- Holds everyone to the same standard
- Produces universal moral guidelines
- Defends the idea that there are "rights" and "wrongs"

Perfect and Imperfect Duties

- Perfect duty: duty obliged to fulfill without exception
  - Example: Telling the truth
- Imperfect duty: duty obliged to fulfill in general but not in every instance
  - Example: Helping others

Case Against Kantianism

- Sometimes no rule adequately characterizes an action
- Sometimes there is no way to resolve a conflict between rules
  - In a conflict between a perfect duty and an imperfect duty, perfect duty prevails
  - In a conflict between two perfect duties, no solution
- Kantianism allows no exceptions to perfect duties
- Conclusion: <u>Despite weaknesses</u>, a workable ethical theory

Consequentialism

Consequentialist Theory

- The rightness and wrongness of actions depends entirely on considerations of <u>good outcomes</u>.

- Emphasis on *consequences*. Duties and obligations are only important if they produce good consequences.

- The most prominent consequentialist theory is **Utilitarianism**
    - Typically associated with **John Stuart Mill** (late 19th century)
    - Originated by Jeremy Bentham (early 19th century)

Consequentialist Theory

Utilitarianism:

The Principle of Net Utility: Of the actions available, you ought to do that act which maximizes overall *net utility* for everyone affected.

In determining what is right and wrong, the good for everyone affected by the action counts equally.

It is basically a math problem: if X act creates Y utility

Utilitarianism

What is "utility?"

- For some Utilitarians it is *pleasure.* Only pleasure is intrinsically good and only pain is intrinsically bad.
  - Do the act that creates the most pleasure.
- For others it is *well-being.*
  - Do the act the creates the most well-being for everyone effected.
- Obviously, it matters what you choose as your measure of utility.
- In general – consequentialism focuses on determining the most positive outcome.

Utilitarianism

- Two flavors:
  - **Act Utilitarianism** – every action is subject to a utility calculation
    - Main problem: disutility of calculating – too hard, takes too long, inexact, bad things can happen while you calculate.
    - How can we know really what will happen (recalling Kant)?
  - **Rule Utilitarianism** (Mill) – adopt "rules of thumb" based on general principles of net utility and hope that individual actions will be good most of the time.
    - Main problem: We may be confronted with situations where a rule of thumb dictates some action but the particular act seems wrong.
    - Same problem – it is really hard to know what the outcome of acts will be.
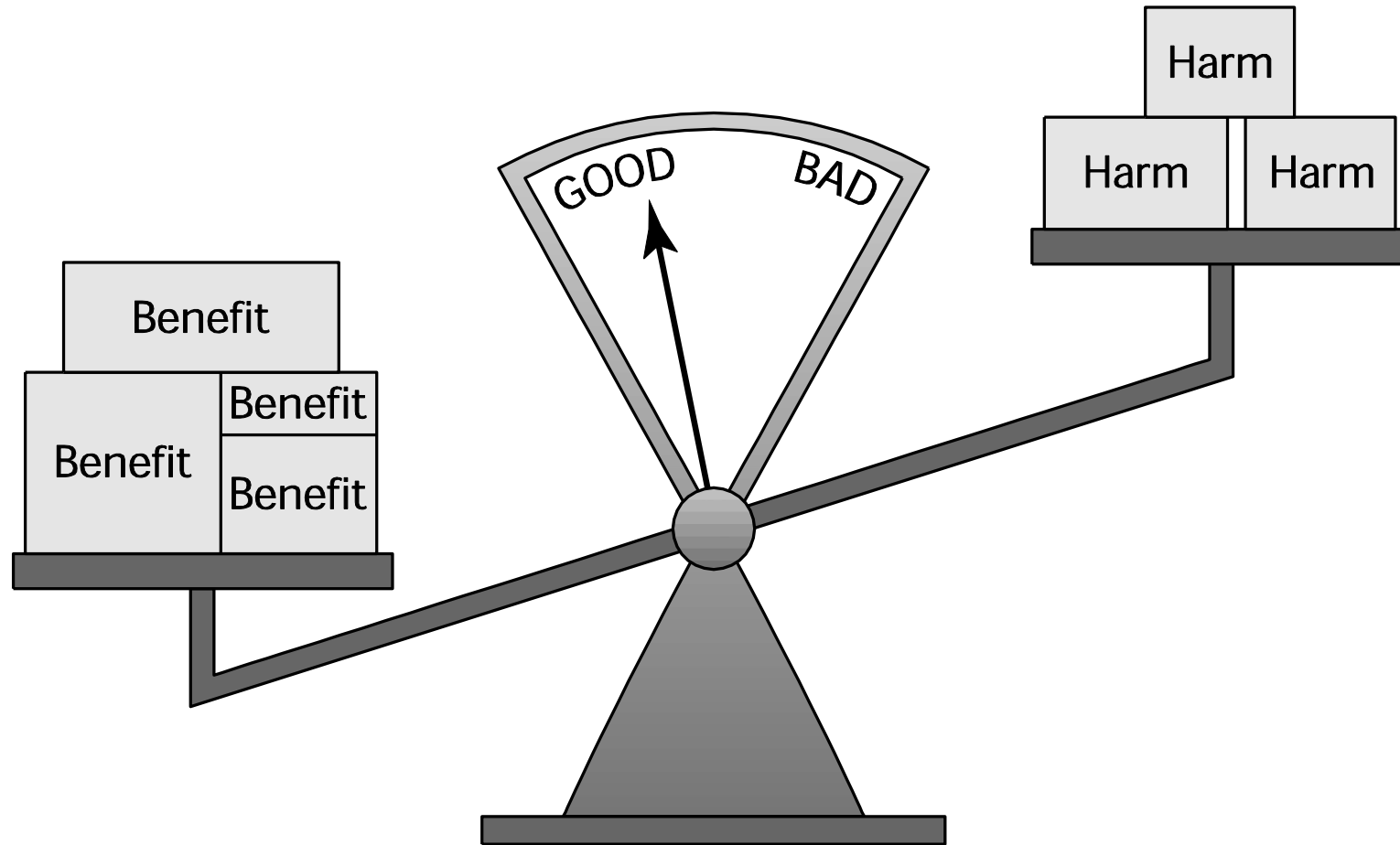
2.7 Act Utilitarianism

Principle of Utility

- Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
- An action is good if its benefits exceeds its harms
- An action is bad if its harms exceed its benefits
- Utility: tendency of an object to produce happiness or prevent unhappiness for an individual or a community
- Happiness = advantage = benefit = good = pleasure
- Unhappiness = disadvantage = cost = evil = pain

Principle of Utility
(Greatest Happiness Principle)

An action is right (or wrong) to the extent
that it increases (or decreases) the
total happiness of the affected parties.

Principle of Utility

Act Utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism
  - Morality of an action has nothing to do with intent
  - Focuses on the consequences
  - A consequentialist theory
- Act utilitarianism
  - Add up change in happiness of all affected beings
  - Sum > 0, action is good
  - Sum < 0, action is bad
  - Right action to take: one that maximizes the sum

Bentham: Weighing Pleasure/Pain

- Intensity

- Duration

- Certainty

- Propinquity

- Fecundity

- Purity

- Extent

Highway Routing Scenario

- State may replace a curvy stretch of highway
- New highway segment 1 mile shorter
- 150 houses would have to be removed
- Some wildlife habitat would be destroyed

Evaluation

- Costs
  - $20 million to compensate homeowners
  - $10 million to construct new highway
  - Lost wildlife habitat worth $1 million

- Benefits
  - $39 million savings in automobile driving costs

- In-Lecture Activity April 11th (part 2)
  - Calculate the net utility

Evaluation

- Costs
  - $20 million to compensate homeowners
  - $10 million to construct new highway
  - Lost wildlife habitat worth $1 million

- Benefits
  - $39 million savings in automobile driving costs

- Conclusion
  - Benefits exceed costs
  - Building highway a good action

Case for Act Utilitarianism

- Focuses on happiness
- Down-to-earth (practical)
- Comprehensive

Case Against Act Utilitarianism

- Unclear whom to include in calculations and how far out into the future to consider

- Too much work – evaluate *every* act?

- Ignores our innate sense of duty

- We cannot predict consequences with certainty (Kant's complaint)

- Susceptible to the problem of moral luck

- Conclusion: Overall, a workable ethical theory