

# Computer Ethics (English)

Spring 2014

BLG412E

**Lecturer:** Damien Jade Duff.  
**Office:** 4307 (BAAL).  
**Office hour:** Wednesdays 1.30pm – 5pm.

## Contents of today's Lecture

More preliminaries:

- Analytical method.
- Features of a moral system.
- Barriers to philosophical ethics.

Theories:

- Virtue ethics.
- Consequentialism & utilitarianism.
- Deontological ethics.
- Social contract.
- Rights-based approaches.

# Preliminaries

The "philosophical ethics" approach.

Covered:

- Analytical method.
- Features of a moral system.
- Arguments against philosophical ethics.

# (An) Analytical method

- Start with some proposition (and an argument).

"Censorship is a restriction of freedom of expression."

- Provide counterpoints, examples, contradictions.

"Necessary to prevent political upheaval?"  
"Internet suicides."  
"What about privacy?"

- Alter or change key argument to incorporate these.

"Censorship must be applied independently within clear boundaries."

- Repeat.

# Philosophical ethics studies moral systems

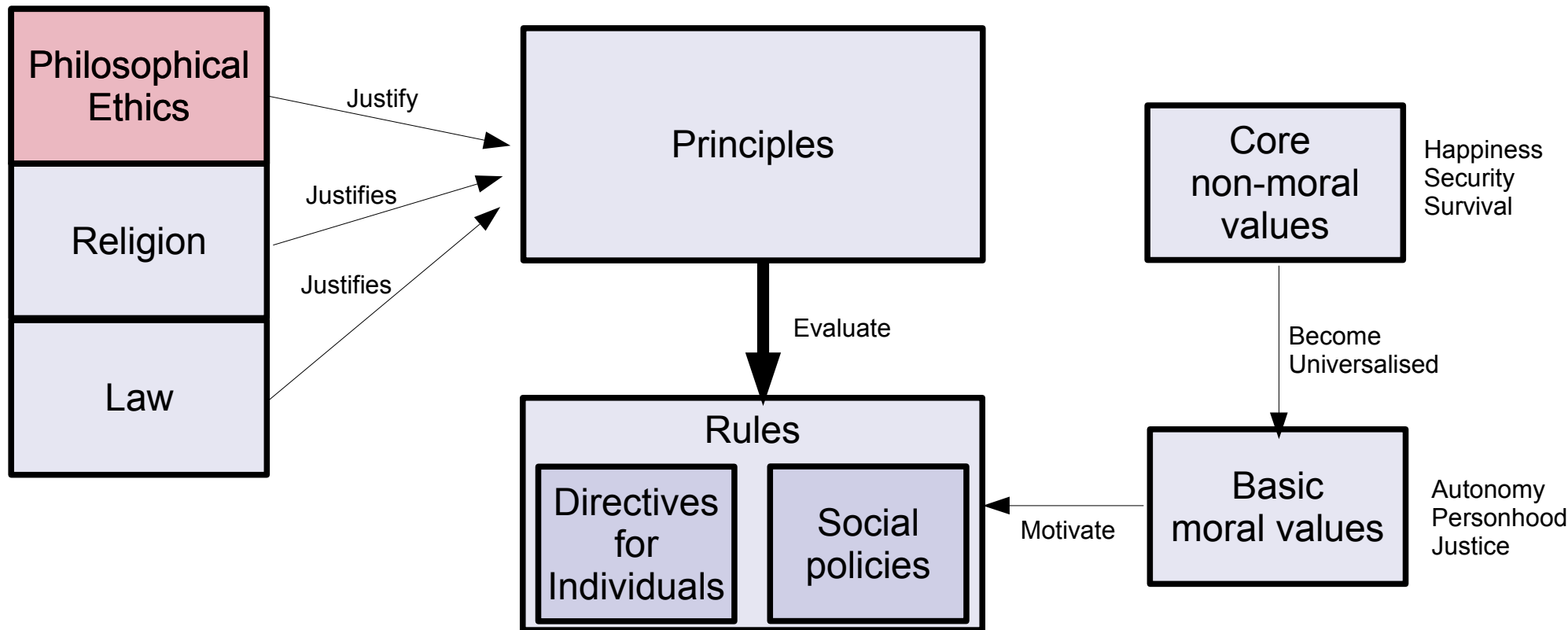
## Philosophical Ethics

The application of reason to the study of normative considerations and particularly moral systems.

### Features of a moral system:

- **Public:** Everybody knows it.
- **Not enforced** ("informal"): No enforcer.
- **Rational:** Accessible through reason.
- **Impartial:** Applied the same to everyone.

# Morale systems: rules of conduct & principles governing them.



# "Discussion stoppers" 1: People disagree

**Core argument:** Even ethicists don't agree, so why study ethics?

**Response:**

1. Computer Scientists don't know if  $P=NP$ .  
Give up on Computer Science?
2. Sometimes ethicists do agree.
3. Sometimes the problem is empirical and not principles.

**Take-home message:**

It is important enough to strive for agreement.

# "Discussion stoppers" 2: I've no right

**Core argument:** It is not my right to judge other people.

**Response:** We make judgements all the time already. Let us do it deliberately.

**Take-home message:**

More awareness can only be better.

# "Discussion stoppers" 3: Morality is a private matter

**Core argument:** Individuals make moral decisions, so individuals decide what is right.

## **Response:**

1. Justification for morality is found in universality.
2. Everybody's choices affect everybody else.

**Take-home message:**

Even lack of a decision is a decision.



# "Discussion stoppers" 4:

## Morality is culturally relative

**Core argument:** Different cultures have different beliefs.

### **Response:**

1. Justification is found in universality.
2. Everybody's choices affect everybody else.

#### **Take-home message:**

However, your "universal" truth may be culturally rooted too.

→ Tolerance of other cultures' and individuals' choices may a good instinct.

# The dark side of philosophical ethics

- "Pure reason" is hard to come by.
- Cultural, political, psychological (and technological) factors affect:
  - What we are aware of.
  - What we think about.
  - The kind of reasoning we use.
  - What we are aware of.
- Take care of teleological reasoning:
  - "It ought to be like this because it is like this".  
e.g. Aristotle's view on slavery.
- Armchair ethics.
  - Academic discourse delaying action.

"Everything is politics" – *Thomas Mann*

# Ethical theories: a summary.

- An attempt to sum-up 3000 years of philosophical speculation.

Not at all haughty.

- To be covered:
  - Virtue ethics.
  - Consequentialism & utilitarianism.
  - Deontological ethics.
  - Social contract theory.
  - Rights-based theories.

# Virtue ethics

- Cultivate good character.
- Not "what should I do"? but "what kind of a person should I be?"
  - Honesty, wisdom, fortitude, justice, prudence,...
- Live your ethics!

The big names: Plato, Aristotle

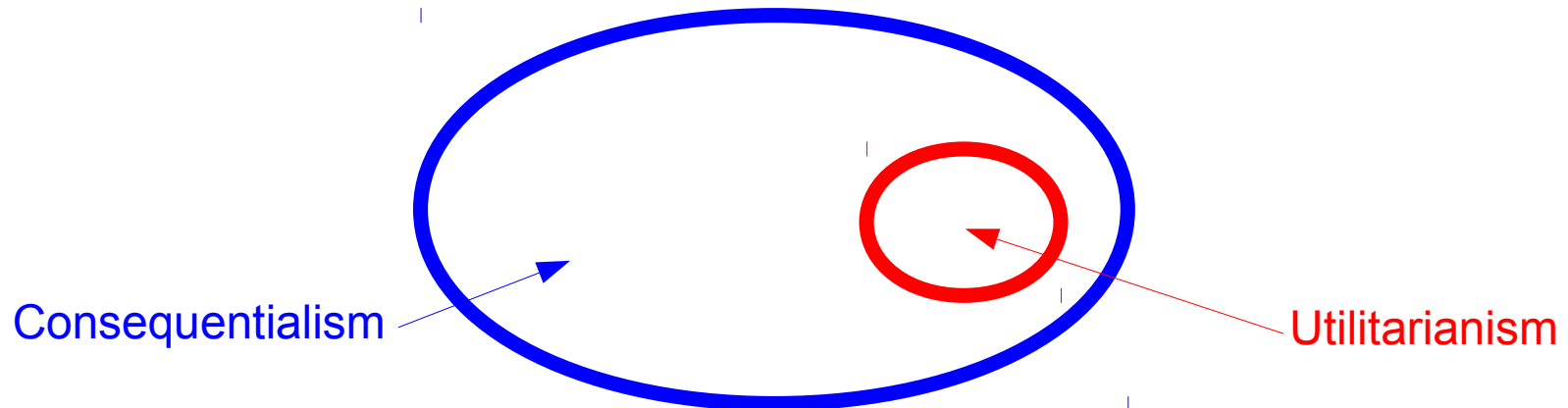
# Utilitarianism & Consequentialism

## Utilitarianism

One should act to improve the well-being of as many people as possible.

## Consequentialism

Actions should be chosen with respect to their known or predicted consequences.



**The big names:** Aristotle, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill

# Two kinds of utilitarianism

## Act utilitarianism

Act so as to improve the well-being of as many people as possible.

BUT: Enslave 1% to make the 99% happy.

## Rule utilitarianism

Choose universal rules for action so as to maximise well-being.

Slavery leads to negative social consequences.

# Issues with utilitarianism.

- Tied to happiness/suffering:
  - Fickle biological/social/psychological constructs.
- Moral luck.
- Doesn't help much with decisions.
- Nothing about justice.

# Deontological ethics

- The only thing that distinguishes us from animals is the will to act with reason.
- We have a duty to act according to our reason.

## Categorical Imperative

### First formulation

Act according to rules that could be universal without contradiction.

### Second formulation

The subjective will itself is the only end and should never be a means.

### Third formulation

Act such that all the possible ends would be harmonized.

The big names: Immanuel Kant



# Deontological ethics

## example: slavery

Slavery is bad because it uses people's intellect as a **means** rather than an **end**.  
Slavery could not be universally applied.

# Criticisms of deontological ethics

*What if two duties contradict?*

- Promised to meet a friend, obliged to help a different friend?
- Lie to stop a murderer?

(Kant resolved this one – how?)

# Social Contract Theory

The life of "pre-moral" man is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (Hobbes).

So: Sacrifice some freedoms and establish a legal code.

- Also, a state.
- Get new freedoms from the contract.

The big names: Thomas Hobbs, John Rawls

# Criticisms of the social contract theory

- Does not apply to non-contracted parts of life.
  - Are you obliged to help someone?
- Should breaking the law be breaking morality?
  - Civil disobedience to improve the system (e.g. anti-slavery marches).

# A Theory of Justice

- Rawls' extension to Hobbes:
- Rather than pre-moral man, consider:
  - Original position.
  - Veil of ignorance.
- Leads to these principles:
  - 1) Maximise minimum level of civil liberty.
  - 2) Maximise minimum level of material wealth.

# Rights-based theories

- Negative rights (freedom from interference):
  - Vote without intimidation.
  - Get education if desired.
- Positive rights (provisions).
  - Right to an education.
  - Health?

# Reading:

Tavani Chapter 2: Ethical Concepts and Ethical  
Theories

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