COM6655 Professional Issues
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Introduction to Ethics

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Overview

- Introduction
- Definitions
- Western Ethical Thought
  - Utilitiaranism, Intuitionism, Duty ethics, Rights ethics, Virtue ethics
- Ethical Problem Solving
- Summary and Conclusions

Introduction

Introduction

- Ethical dilemmas occur frequently in professional practice; we must be equipped to deal with them.
- In particular, it's important to consider the likely effects of engineering and the software we produce.
- Tutorials have given you some practice in this.

No right answers

- Ethical dilemmas are inherently subjective; there is no 'right' answer, and no step-by-step algorithm that can be used to solve ethical problems.

- In this lecture we consider:
  o The origins of (western) moral and ethical philosophy;
  o Practical approaches to ethical problem solving.

- This is a superficial overview of a very deep subject!
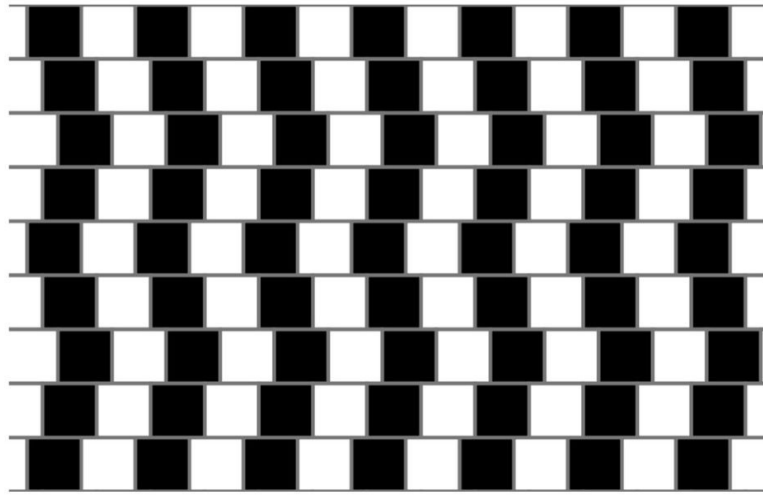
Definitions

Definitions

- We will be discussing:
  o Philosophy
  o Moral philosophy
  o Personal and professional ethics
- We start by explaining what these terms mean (in the context of this module).
- These ideas may seem a world away from information and computer science.
- Why do they matter?

What is philosophy?

- The main purpose of philosophy is to critically evaluate assumptions and arguments.

- Philosophy asks us to examine assumptions that people accept without question

- E.g. *Seeing is believing*.

Seeing is believing?

Parallel lines?

Are our beliefs justified?

- Having examined our beliefs and assumptions (our own, and other people's), we need to decide – do our beliefs make sense?
- On consideration, we will either:
  - Decide that we have good reason to hold the belief, and continue to hold it (**but now with rational assurance** rather than unthinking acceptance);
  - Decide that we do not have good reason to hold the belief, and suspend judgement or seek a new framework of belief.

Moral philosophy

- Moral philosophy is inquiry about values:
  - ideas of right and wrong,
  - good and bad,
  - what should be done and what should not be done.
- Moral philosophy is not practical in any simple sense; it cannot, and does not try to, tell us what to do.
- However, philosophical debate can conclude that a set of beliefs should definitely be rejected if:
  - It is internally inconsistent OR it rests on a factual assumption that is false

Personal and professional ethics

- Ethics concerns the philosophical discussion of assumptions about right and wrong, good and bad, considered as general ideas and applied
- In the private life of individuals (personal ethics)
- To the behaviour of individuals within a particular profession (professional ethics)
- The terms moral philosophy and ethics are often used interchangeably, but moral philosophy has a wider scope; it concerns values in organised social life (politics and law) as well as private and professional relationships.

Grounding for rules of conduct

- What are our reasons for believing that some behaviours are better than others? For example:

  "Do not steal"

- This is widely accepted as a rule of conduct.

- But why is stealing wrong?

- What is the basis for accepting this rule of conduct? What is its grounding?

Religious grounding

- "Stealing is wrong because it offends God"

- Grounding in a religious system

- **Q. What are the possible objections to this?**

Legal grounding

- "Stealing is wrong because it violates the law"

- Grounding in law

- **Q. What are the possible objections to this?**

Philosophical grounding

- "Stealing is wrong because … (give a reasoned argument)"

- Grounding in philosophy

- According to this approach there is no external authority that can be consulted to find the answers. Everything is based on reason.

- **Q. What are the possible objections to this?**

Example: privacy

- Is personal privacy a good thing?
  - Is it possible to answer this question?
  - If so, is the answer yes, no or sometimes?
- Why might an individual
  - **want** personal privacy? personal space, intimacy, …
  - **not want** personal privacy? isolation, …
- Why might a society
  - **promote** personal privacy? safety valve allowing legal but antisocial behaviour, …
  - **oppose** personal privacy? can be used to support criminal behaviour, …