

COM6655 Professional Issues

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Introduction to Ethics (Part 2)

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Overview

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

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, ...**



Western ethical thought

Western ethical thought

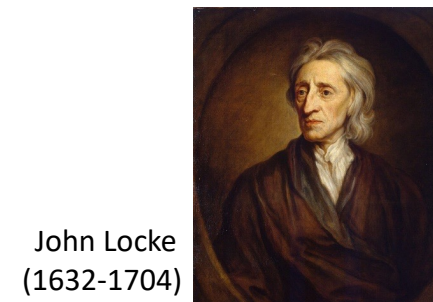
- Western moral thought is derived from thinking of ancients in Europe and the Middle East.
- Jewish moral traditions via Christianity – e.g., the Torah and Bible enumerate moral laws (e.g. the “Ten Commandments”).
- Ancient Greek ethical thought, e.g. Socrates and Aristotle.
- Aristotle produced a lengthy treatise on ethics: the Nichomachean Ethics. [<http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.html>]

Ethical theories

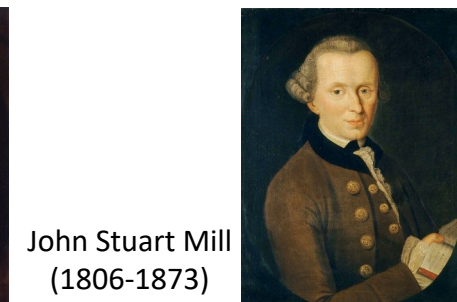
- Ethical theories are like scientific theories - they
 - Define terms;
 - Organize ideas; and
 - Facilitate problem solving.
- There are many ethical theories, reflecting a diversity of approaches to ethical problem solving.
- Different theories give us different perspectives on an ethical dilemma.
- To illustrate this we will consider five different ethical theories.

Western moral philosophers

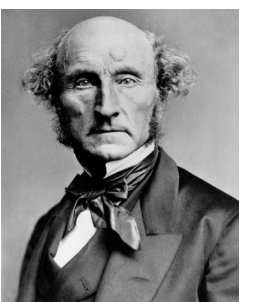
- Philosophers such as



John Locke
(1632-1704)



John Stuart Mill
(1806-1873)



Immanuel Kant
(1724-1804)

have reasoned about moral and ethical issues without a religious underpinning. They proposed that **moral principles are universal**, and applicable even in secular (i.e. non-religious) contexts.

- Godfrey Kneller - Portrait of John Locke (Hermitage).jpg (from arthermitage.org), Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=110128>
- Immanuel Kant – Portrait by Johann Gottlieb Becker (1720-1782) - <http://www.philosophie.de/kant-bilder/bilddaten.html>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=32860677>
- John Stuart Mill – By London Stereoscopic Company - Hulton Archive, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=30913285>

Five ethical theories

- **Utilitarianism**
 - seeks to produce the most **utility**;
- **Intuitionism**
 - proposes a number of **self-evident principles** of right action;
- **Duty ethics**
 - contends that there are **duties** which should be performed (such as treating people fairly);
- **Rights ethics**
 - contends that all individuals have **moral rights**, and that violating these is unacceptable;
- **Virtue ethics**
 - discriminates between acts of good character (**virtues**) and acts of bad character (**vices**).

Underlying approaches

- There are two main approaches to ethical issues:
 - **Consequentialist** (*teleological*)
 - Greek: τέλος, *telos* ("purpose"); -λογία, *logia* ("study of")
 - an act is morally good if it has good consequences
 - "a greedy act is good if it prompts people to spend money in needy communities"
 - **Deontological** (duty/rights)
 - Greek: δέον, *deon* ("duty"); -λογία, *-logia*, (study of)
 - acts are right or wrong regardless of their consequences
 - "even though things worked out badly, we meant well"

Utilitarianism

- There are many flavours of this consequentialist theory, first proposed by Jeremy Bentham. We focus here on **act utilitarianism** (Mill), which holds that an action is right if it is useful for promoting happiness.
- **An action is right (it is the action you should do) if it seems likely to you that it will produce more happiness than any alternative action.**
- **Therefore:** Consider those persons (and other creatures) that will be significantly affected. Choose the action that will produce "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (pleasure vs pain)
- Utilitarianism is fundamental to **risk-benefit** and **cost-benefit** analysis.

Utilitarianism and the law

- People often act in their own self-interest, but "greatest happiness of greatest number" implies altruism (concern for others).
- If people act in their own self-interest, how can their actions be made to serve the advantage of everyone?
- **Utilitarian view of law:**
 - Laws resolve conflict between self-interest and wider happiness
 - Laws exist to promote the happiness of the community

Utilitarian reasoning



- Why is it wrong to steal?
 - Stealing might increase the thief's happiness, but it will be bad for society as a whole if property rights have no meaning.
 - Stealing benefits one person, but inconveniences lots of others
 - Therefore, it is not right to steal - because it diminishes overall happiness
 - Therefore, laws should exist which protect society against theft. They should:
 - make stealing less attractive to the thief (e.g, punishment/imprisonment).
 - BUT the law should not make the thief disproportionately unhappy (this would reduce total happiness). Therefore:
 - the punishment for theft should be just enough to deter the thief.

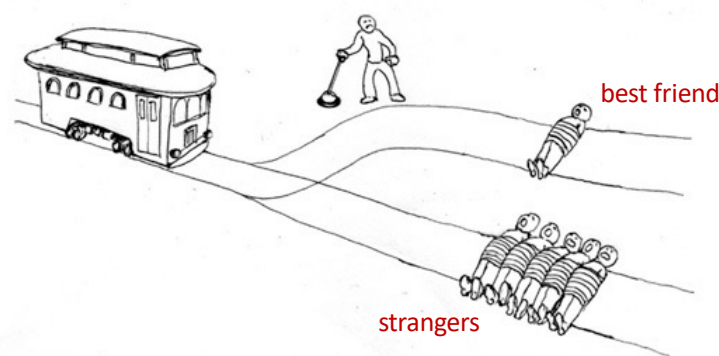
Objections to utilitarianism

- How does one **know** what will lead to the greatest good? Often we don't know what the consequences of our actions are.
- It can ignore the needs of individuals, or of a smaller group relative to a larger group.
- Act utilitarianism
 - working out likely consequences of every action.
- Rule utilitarianism
 - avoids this. Suggests behavioural rules which result in consequences that are more favourable than unfavourable to everyone.

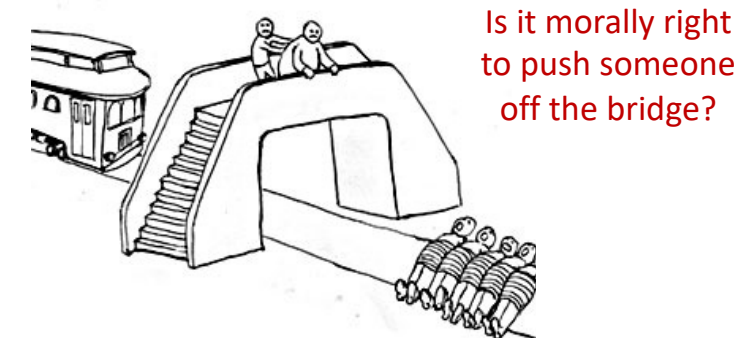
Objections to utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism also ignores the **personal** character of moral obligation.
- **Q. If faced with either saving your mother, or else two strangers, from a burning building – what would you do if you were a strict utilitarian?**

Do friends matter more?

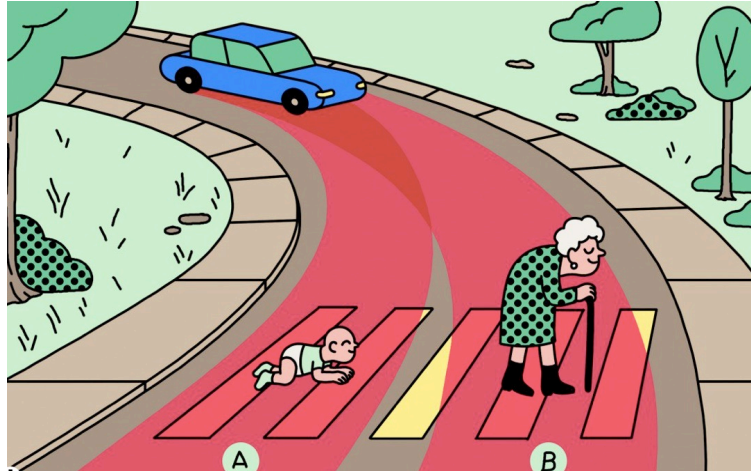


Problems



The train driver will put on the brakes, stopping the train. The person will be killed, but the five people tied to the track will survive. If you don't do this, all five will be killed.

Does age matter?



Moral Machine Experiment

Awad et al, (2018) The moral machine experiment, Nature, October 2018.

- This study shows people a collection of moral dilemmas involving a driverless car and asked for their opinion.
Over the course of 4 years, it recorded 40 million decisions across 233 countries.
- Examples: When faced with a choice, should a self-driving car prioritise
 - Humans or pets?
 - Passengers or pedestrians?
 - Saving more lives or fewer?
 - Women or men, young or old, fit or sickly?
 - Law abiders or criminals?
- This showed that people don't always agree:
 - 'collectivist' countries less likely to protect the young at the expense of the old.
 - 'Individualist' countries more likely to focus on sparing more lives.
- Strongest preferences: sparing humans over animals, sparing more lives, sparing young lives.

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-018-0637-6>

Intuitionism

- A stance adopted by rationalist philosophers; we reason about ethics in the same way as we reason about mathematics.
- There are **self-evident** principles of right action:
 - Promoting the happiness of oneself and others
 - Refraining from harm to other people
 - Treating people justly, telling the truth, keeping promises
 - Showing gratitude, maintaining and promoting one's own self-respect
- Conflicts between these principles must be resolved by rational intuition (like solving mathematical problems).

Intuitionism vs utilitarianism

- Intuitionists argue that utilitarians have concentrated on **only a few** of these self-evident principles.
- Problems with intuitionism:
 - principles are not always self-evident
 - how do you resolve conflict between principles?
- **Q. Can you think of an example where conflict between principles arises?**

Duty ethics and rights ethics

- Basically two sides of the same coin
- **Both** hold that **good actions respect the rights of individuals**.
- **Rights ethics** was largely formulated by Locke; his claim that individuals have basic rights which others should respect was paraphrased in the US Declaration of Independence.
- The main proponent of **duty ethics** was Kant.

Kant: categorical imperatives

- An imperative is an instruction to do something. Kant identified two types:
 - Hypothetical (prudential) imperatives:
 - Do X if you want Y or You ought to do X to achieve Y.
 - The action X is a means to an end. That end is Y.
 - **Example:**
“Do exercise if you want to be healthy”
 - Categorical (moral) imperatives: No “if” involved.
 - The action involved is not a means to an end, but an end in itself.
 - It is simply something you should do.
 - **Example:**
“Be kind to others”

Kant's three formulations of the categorical imperative

- **First form: Act as if you are legislating for everyone**
 - In other words, when you are considering whether an action is morally right or wrong, you should ask yourself whether you would want everyone to behave in that way.
 - Treat your decision as if it was a law for everyone.

Categorical imperative (cont'd)

- **Second form: Act so as to treat human beings always as ends and never merely as means**
 - This suggests the standard of morally right action.
 - By treating people as ends, you **recognise that they have goals just as you have**; you respect their desires.

Treating people as “means”

- There is nothing wrong with treating a person as a means as long as you do not treat people **merely** as a means. Some examples:
 - “Carpenter, please make me some shelves”
 - I can ask a carpenter to make me a set of shelves – he tells me his price and I pay him.
 - The work serves his purposes as well as mine.
 - “Slave, make me some shelves”
 - But if I tell a slave to make me a set of shelves, I am treating him merely as a means.
 - Making the shelves does not serve his purposes.

Golden rule (golden maxim)

- Kantian principles are related to (but not the same) as the “Golden Rule”.
 “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”
- The Golden Rule can be seen as foundation for all ethics, and is found in many religions and ethical codes, e.g.,
 - Ancient Egypt:
 that which you hate to be done to you, do not do to another
 - Ancient India (Sanskrit tradition):
 treat others as you treat yourself
 - Confucianism:
 never impose on others what you would not choose for yourself
 - Taoism:
 regard your neighbour's gain as your own gain, and your neighbour's loss as your own loss

*See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_Rule for more examples.

Categorical imperative (cont'd)

- **Third form: Act as if you were a member of a realm of ends**
 - Here, 'realm' means a State, a politically organised society. The idea is that you should
 - **Act as a member of a community,**
 - All of whom treat others as ends rather than means
 - All of whom decide as if they were legislating for all.
 - This formulation joins the first two together.

Problems

- What about people who can't fully participate in the 'realm of ends', e.g.,
 - People with very limited cognitive abilities
 - Hospital patients in a coma
 - **Do they have the same rights and duties as everyone else?**
- What about other current or future entities which aren't in the 'realm of ends'?
 - Animals?
 - Self-aware machines?

Virtue ethics

- What kind of people should we be?
- Actions are considered right if they support good character traits (**virtues**) such as
 - Honesty, loyalty, responsibility
- Actions are considered wrong if they support bad character traits (**vices**) such as
 - Dishonesty, disloyalty, irresponsibility
- Particularly concerned with **personal ethics** – it can be hard to describe nonhuman entities like governments or corporations in terms of virtue

Summary: virtue ethics

- Virtue theory: the view that the foundation of morality is the development of good character traits, or virtues:
 - A good person has virtues and lacks vices.
- Typical virtues:
 - Courage, justice, prudence, fortitude, liberality, truthfulness.
- Emphasis on moral education:
 - Adults are responsible for instilling virtues in the young.
- Historically oldest normative tradition.
 - Earliest account: in Aristotle's Nichomachean Ethics.
 - Influential through Middle Ages.
 - Largely succeeded by "rule" emphasis of moral theories like utilitarianism

Summary: utilitarianism

- Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to promote the reverse.
- Individual happiness or general happiness?
- A prudent person should realise that they need the help of others to achieve their own happiness, and should induce their help by doing things for them.
- Emphasis on law and government:
 - People generally act with a view to their own self-interest or happiness.
 - Laws - designed to secure the happiness of society.
- Utilitarianism: provides a way of linking ethics, law and government.

Summary: intuitionism

- "Intuition" refers to understanding, as in understanding of self-evident truths of logic and mathematics.
- Based on the belief that there are self-evident moral principles:
 - promoting the happiness of people
 - refraining from harm to other people
 - treating people justly
 - telling the truth
 - keeping promises
 - showing gratitude
 - promoting one's own happiness
 - maintaining and promoting one's own self-respect

Intuitionism: problems

- Principles not entirely self-evident - different moral principles can be identified.
- What happens if principles conflict:
 - e.g. you can give a truthful answer only at the expense of breaking confidentiality?
- If there was a single fundamental principle, it could be used to resolve conflicts.
- Utilitarianism, and the greatest happiness principle could provide such a rule.

Utilitarianism: problems

- Greatest happiness principle can also be implicated in conflicts:
 - e.g. right action is that which produces the greatest happiness for the greatest number - but then would it be better to give £400 to 2 old age pensioners, or £2 to 200 pensioners, enabling them all to buy a cup of tea?
- Also, it has problems with the idea of **justice**:
 - e.g. might be convenient to convict an innocent man as a terrorist bomber - will have a deterrent effect on genuine bombers.
 - But it seems wrong to convict an innocent man!

Summary: Kantian ethics

- Categorical imperatives
 - Act as if you are legislating for everyone
 - Act so as to treat human beings always as ends and never merely as means
 - Act as if you were a member of a realm of ends
- (Arguably) Provides a better account of the personal character of ethics

Kant: problems

- Quite inflexible, e.g., for Kant, lying is never acceptable
 - “By a lie a man throws away and ... annihilates his dignity as a man”
- But consider:
 - *A ship is carrying fugitives from attempted genocide, and is stopped by an enemy patrol who ask if there are any fugitives aboard.*
 - Should the captain lie or tell the truth?
- Does not explain why obligations to friends and family are stronger than to others (all people should be treated as ends).
 - *A young man whose country has been invaded: should he join the Resistance movement, or stay to look after his widowed mother?*