

L2.2 - Ethical Theories – Part 1



CS 230 : Ethical Issues in Computing
Fall 2020
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BSU

“There is only one thing a philosopher can be relied upon to do,
and that is to contradict other philosophers.”

-- William James

Announcements

- LA-1 due next Tuesday before midnight
- LA-2 available tomorrow
- Discussion Board
- Participation Point
 - Email me
 - Subject: [CS230] participation
 - Describe one of the clips we watched and what the action was we analyzed

- **Society:** community with rules for mutual benefit
- **Morality:** society's rules
- **Ethics:** philosophical examination of moral conduct
- **Ethical Point of View:** respect other members of society by obeying the rules
- **Identifying Ethical Issues**
 - Must involve voluntary action by a moral agent
 - Must have potential harm or benefit to society

- Rejected Ethical Theories
 - Subjective Relativism
 - Cultural Relativism
 - Divine Command
 - Ethical Egoism
- Kantianism
- Utilitarianism
 - Act Utilitarianism
 - Rule Utilitarianism

Rejected Ethical Theories: Ethical Relativism

- Moral standards are contextual – none apply universally
- What's right for one person/culture may not be right for another
- Who are we to judge?
- **Subjective relativism**
 - Individual moral codes – decide for yourself
 - Pro
 - Avoids pointless and unproductive moral debates
 - Con
 - Devolves into do what you feel like
 - No moral judgment on people's actions
 - Not workable as a general ethical theory

Rejected Ethical Theories: Ethical Relativism

- **Cultural relativism**
 - Societal moral codes for a particular culture
 - Differences based on place and/or time
 - Pro
 - Different historical and cultural contexts influence a society's morality
 - Seems arrogant to judge another culture
 - Con
 - Does not explain how moral code is determined
 - Does not account for intra-society differences
 - Does not characterize society's morality to evolve
 - No way to resolve cultural conflicts
 - Only indirectly based on reason (initially, then tradition)
 - Logical arguments against:
 - **many/any** fallacy – *many* does not imply *any*
 - core values can be found across all societies

Rejected Ethical Theories: Divine Command

- Divine Command
 - Good actions: those aligned with God's will
 - Bad actions: those contrary to God's will
 - Holy books reveal God's will
 - We should use holy books as moral decision-making guides
- Logical arguments against:
 - Different holy books disagree on certain teachings
 - Divine command theory is impractical because society is multicultural, secular
 - Some modern moral problems not directly addressed in scripture
 - Based on obedience, not reason
 - Conclusion: Not a workable ethical theory for our purposes

Rejected Ethical Theories: Ethical Egoism

- Maximization of long-term self-interest guides moral decisions
- Pro
 - Aligns with our natural inclination
 - Better to let other people take care of themselves
 - The community can benefit when individuals put their well-being first
 - Other moral principles are rooted in the principle of self-interest
- Con
 - We know a lot about what is good for someone else
 - Self-interest can lead to blatantly immoral behavior
 - Other moral principles are superior to principle of self-interest
 - People who take the good of others into account lead happier lives
 - By definition, does not respect the ethical point of view
- Conclusion: Not a workable ethical theory

Kantianism



Immanuel Kant 1724-1804

German philosopher, professor at Konigsberg best known for his work 'Critique of Pure Reason'

- Religious upbringing though not religious
- Appreciated the benefits of organized religion but dissatisfied with their ethics
- Attempted to find a rational basis for morality
- Search for objective good leads to **good will**
- Reason should guide us to develop a **good will**
- Our will to do good informs us of what we should do also known as our **duty**
- Our duty arises as a result of a moral rule
- We must determine the correctness of the moral rules that compel us
- Deontological Ethics – “duty” ethics

Kantianism

- Our reason commands our will through **imperatives**
- **Hypothetical imperative** is a conditional that allows for choice:
 - If you want to play the violin then practice
- **Categorical imperative** is unconditional and always applies
- Only a **categorical imperative** can be a moral imperative

Kant's Categorical Imperative

Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws.

Kant's Categorical Imperative

Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws.

- Applying the categorical imperative to a moral situation can help us determine if we are “cheating” by making special exceptions for our own behavior
- Example:
 - Should I lie on a job application?
 - Applying the categorical imperative would mean that everyone can lie on a job application
 - Your lies would be meaningless since there would be no way to trust what's written on a job application
 - Leads to a contradiction or paradox

Kant's Categorical Imperative 2

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

- Alternative formulation focuses on the dignity and respect that every individual deserves
- We should never “use” people, but instead work together for mutual benefit

Kantianism

- Sample Analysis
- 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

Kantianism

- First 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
 - Proposed moral rule is self-defeating
- It is wrong for Carla to turn in a purchased report

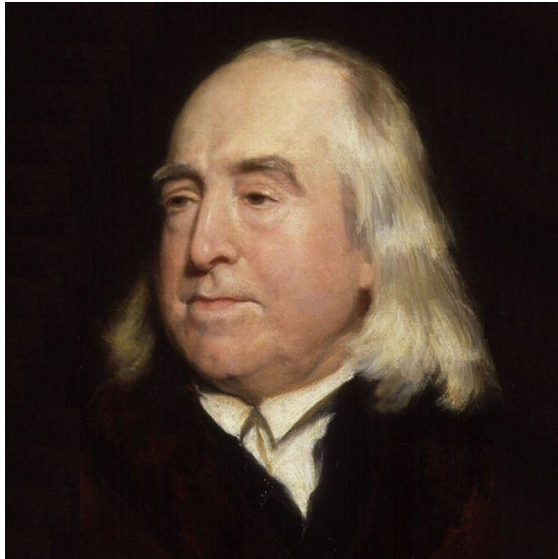
Kantianism

- Second 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

Kantianism

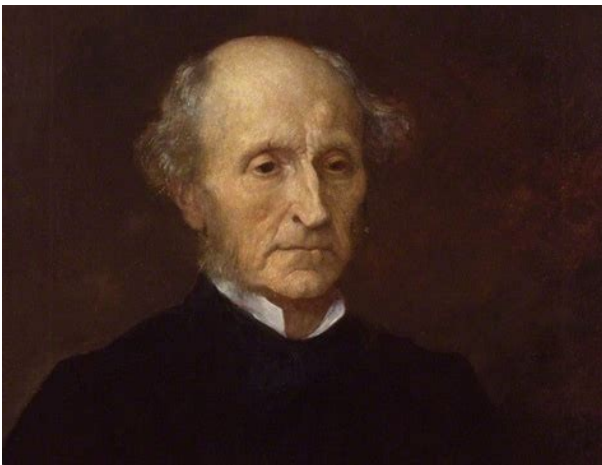
- Pro
 - Treats all persons as moral equals
 - Gives all people moral worth as rational, autonomous beings
 - Holds everyone to the same standard
 - Produces universal moral guidelines
- Con
 - Sometimes no rule adequately characterizes an action
 - Sometimes there is no way to resolve a conflict between 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: Despite weaknesses, a workable ethical theory

Utilitarianism



Jeremy Bentham
1748-1832

English philosopher, jurist and social reformer



John Stuart Mill
1806-1873

English philosopher, political economist and civil servant

Utilitarianism

- **Consequentialist** theories looking at results to decide morality
- Act Utilitarianism developed by Bentham and later Mill
- 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.

- **Utility**: tendency of an object to produce happiness or prevent unhappiness for an individual or a community
- Where happiness / unhappiness is broadly defined to include:
 - advantage / disadvantage
 - benefit / cost
 - good / evil
 - pleasure / pain

Utilitarianism

- Sample Analysis
 - 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
 - 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

Utilitarianism

- Pro
 - Focuses on happiness
 - Down-to-earth (practical)
 - Comprehensive
- Con
 - Unclear whom to include in calculations and how far out into the future to consider
 - Too much work
 - Ignores our innate sense of duty
 - We cannot predict consequences with certainty
 - Susceptible to the problem of **moral luck**
- Conclusion
 - Overall, a workable ethical theory

Utilitarianism

- Rule Utilitarianism developed to address weaknesses
- Measure the consequences of *rules* vs. *acts*
- Like Kantianism focus is on moral rules
- Principle of Rule Utility

Adopt moral rules which, if followed by everyone, will lead to the greatest increase in total happiness

- Sample Analysis
 - August 2003: Blaster worm infected thousands of Windows computers
 - Soon after, Nachi worm appeared
 - Took control of vulnerable computer
 - Located and destroyed copies of Blaster
 - Downloaded software patch to fix security problem
 - Used computer as launching pad to try to “infect” other vulnerable PCs

Utilitarianism

- Sample Analysis
 - Proposed rule: If I can write a helpful worm that removes a harmful worm from infected computers and shields them from future attacks, I should do so
 - Who would benefit
 - People who do not keep their systems updated
 - Who would be harmed
 - People who use networks (everyone)
 - People whose computers are invaded by buggy anti-worms
 - System administrators
 - Conclusion
 - Harm outweighs benefits. Releasing anti-worm is wrong.

Utilitarianism

- Rule Utilitarianism
 - Pro
 - Not every moral decision requires performing utilitarian calculus
 - Moral rules survive exceptional situations
 - Avoids the problem of moral luck
 - Reduces the problem of bias
 - Appeals to a wide cross-section of society
- Utilitarianism
 - Con
 - All consequences must be measured on a single scale.
 - All units must be the same in order to do the sum
 - In certain circumstances utilitarians must quantify the value of a human life
 - Utilitarianism ignores the problem of an unjust distribution of good consequences.
 - Utilitarianism does **not** mean “the greatest good of the greatest number” That requires a principle of justice
 - What happens when a conflict arises between the Principle of Utility and a principle of justice?
 - Conclusion
 - Despite weaknesses, both act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism are workable ethical theories

Next Time

- Read sections 2.9 – 2.10
- Social Contract Theory
- Virtue Ethics