

L3.1 - Ethical Theories – Part 2



CS 230 : Ethical Issues in Computing
Fall 2020
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BSU

Philosophy is like trying to open a safe with a combination lock: each little adjustment of the dials seems to achieve nothing, only when everything is in place does the door open.

– *Ludwig Wittgenstein*

Announcements

- LA-1 due midnight today
- LA-2 due in one week
- Chappie – not an ethical issue IF not a being
- Video posts
 - Ethics
 - Ethical POV
 - vs. moralistic, humanistic, humane

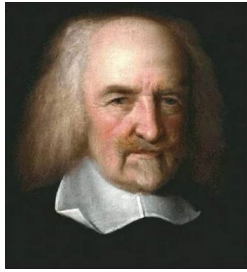
Last Time

- Rejected Theories
 - Relativism
 - Divine Command Theory (objective or relative?)
 - Ethical Egoism
- Kantianism
 - Deontological (duty) ethics
 - Categorical Imperative
- Act Utilitarianism
 - Principle of Utility (Greatest Happiness)
- Rule Utilitarianism

Today

- Social Contract Theory
- Virtue Ethics

Social Contract Theory



Thomas Hobbes
1588-1679

English philosopher, best known for his work 'Leviathan'

- Experienced first-hand English civil war and resulting social anarchy
- Without enforced rules
 - people would not create anything of value because they could not be sure keeping it.
 - Life would be “nasty, brutish, and short”
- Instead, cooperation is essential – but there must be mutually agreed guidelines
- Moral rules are those rules necessary for the benefits of social living

Social Contract Theory

- You implicitly agree to the **social contract** by living in society
- **The Social Contract**
 - A set of moral rules to govern relations among citizens
 - A government capable of enforcing the rules
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)
 - No one has a natural right over another
 - Legitimate authority must be based on covenants
 - In ideal society, no one above rules
 - That prevents society from enacting bad rules
- James Rachels definition:

Morality consists in the set of rules, governing how people are to treat one another, that rational people will agree to accept, for their mutual benefit, on the condition that others follow those rules as well.

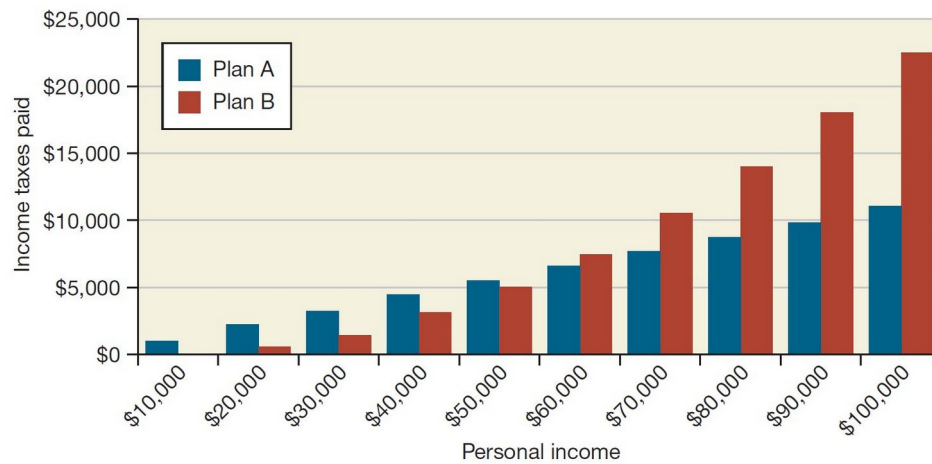
Social Contract Theory

- Many philosophers of 17th and 18th centuries concluded that we have **rights**
- Your **right** implies my **duty**
 - **negative right**: others have a duty to leave you alone
 - **positive right**: others have a duty to do something for you
 - **absolute right**: guaranteed without exception
 - **limited right**: may be restricted based on the circumstances
- Positive rights tend to be more limited
- Negative rights tend to be more absolute

Social Contract Theory

- John Rawls (1921 – 2002) : **Theory of Justice**
- Society must determine a just distribution of “the benefits and burdens of social cooperation”
- **Veil of Ignorance**: agree to principles before knowing place in society
- **Principles of Justice**
 - Each person may claim a “fully adequate” number of basic rights and liberties, so long as these claims are consistent with everyone else having a claim to the same rights and liberties
 - Any social and economic inequalities must:
 - Be associated with positions that everyone has a fair and equal opportunity to achieve
 - Be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle)

Social Contract Theory



- **Difference principle:** social and economic inequalities must be justified by providing the most benefit to the least advantaged

Social Contract Theory

- Sample Analysis
- Bill owns chain of convenience stores
- Collects information about purchases from customers
- Constructs profiles of customers
- Who owns a pet, who cares for an infant, etc.
- Sells profiles to direct marketing firms
- Some customers happy to receive more mail order catalogs; others unhappy at increase in “junk mail”

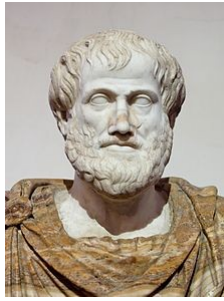
Kantianism

- Consider rights of Bill, customers, and mail order companies.
- Does customer have right to expect name, address to be kept confidential?
- If customer purchases something from Bill, who owns information about transaction?
- If Bill and customer have equal rights to information, Bill did nothing wrong to sell information.
- If customers have right to expect name and address or transaction to be confidential without giving permission, then Bill was wrong to sell information without asking for permission.

Social Contract Theory

- Pro
 - Framed in language of rights
 - Explains why people act in self-interest in absence of common agreement
 - Tragedy of the commons
 - Provides clear analysis of certain citizen/government problems
 - Why okay for government to deprive criminals of certain rights
 - Why civil obedience can be morally right action
- Con
 - No one signed social contract
 - Some actions have multiple characterizations
 - Conflicting rights problem
 - May unjustly treat people incapable of upholding contract
- Conclusion: Despite weaknesses, a workable ethical theory

Virtue Ethics



Aristotle
384-322 BC

Greek philosopher during classical period in Ancient Greece, wrote *Nicomachean Ethics*

- Path to greatest happiness and fulfillment is a life of virtue
- **Arete**: virtue, excellence, reaching one's highest potential

Virtue Ethics

- **Virtues**
 - intellectual virtues: associated with reasoning and truth
 - moral virtues: character (e.g., honesty)
 - developed by habitually performing right action
 - deep-seated character traits
 - disposition to act in a certain way **and** feel in a certain way
- **Vices**
 - opposite of virtues
 - a character trait that prevents a human being from flourishing or being truly happy
- Often, a virtue situated between two vices
- Courage between cowardliness and rashness
- Generosity between stinginess and prodigality

Virtue Ethics

- Summary of Virtue Ethics
 - A right action is an action that a virtuous person, acting in character, would do in the same circumstances.
 - A virtuous person is a person who possesses and lives out the virtues.
 - The virtues are those character traits human beings need in order to flourish and be truly happy.

Virtue Ethics

- Pro
 - It often makes more sense to focus on virtues than obligations, rights, or consequences
 - Personal relationships can be morally relevant to decision making
 - Theory recognizes our moral decision-making skills develop over time
 - With this theory there are no irresolvable moral dilemmas
 - Emotions play an important role in living a moral life
- Con
 - Reasonable people may disagree on character traits needed for human flourishing
 - Cannot use virtue ethics to guide government policy
 - Virtue ethics undermines attempts to hold people responsible for their bad actions
- Conclusion
 - Despite weaknesses, virtue ethics a workable theory