

## Module 1: Ethical Philosophy

### **Introduction to Ethical Thinking**

- Ethical conundrum 1: Price gouging in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey (2017)
  - Prices for basic necessities drastically increased
  - Examples of greed, supply and demand
  - Should we establish “fair prices”?
  - A worthy capitalist argument: inflated prices attract resources needed for reconstruction
    - Suppliers are more willing to give the supplies to reconstruct
    - Aftermath of a hurricane is not a free market (not an every day situation)
      - Not making rational decisions => coerced market
  - So how do we establish the “right” thing to do under these circumstances?
    - Must government be neutral, or should it aim to promote virtue and virtuous behaviour?
    - This is in fact one of the most central questions of modern ethical philosophy
- Ethical conundrum 2: Bonuses in the wake of 2008-2009 financial crisis
  - American families (middle class) lost 11 trillion dollars collectively
  - 700bn\$ in government bailout to country’s biggest banks deemed “too big to fail”
  - Soon after, corporate execs received generous bonuses
  - Closer to home: same story with Bombardier last years
    - Few months later, execs had received bonuses
  - People are angry that they got bonuses when they failed => bonuses on tax payers dime
  - Did the execs deserved the money?
    - What exactly would make them deserve it?
      - Greed/failure
    - What does it mean to deserve something?
  - Execs gave a systemic argument => it’s not our personal fault, but a problem in the system (why should we get punished for it)
  - How should we judge people’s salaries?
    - Skills, supply and demand, education
- Ethics: Rational pursuit for the international basis of right and wrong
  - Used to be based on religion
  - Rules of social conduct
- Three “branches” to the field of Ethics:
  - Metaethics
    - Fundamental nature of Good and Evil
    - Origin of morals
  - Normative Ethics
    - Establish norms of ethics
    - More practical analysis of difference of good and evil
  - Applied Ethics
    - Animal & Human rights
    - Healthcare & Political Ethics
- Two types of ethical arguments
  - Descriptive
    - Fact => no one can tell you, you are wrong

- Normative/Prescriptive
  - Opinion => invites debate
    - Expects arguments to support opinion
- We can identify two major types of ethical philosophies
  - Deontology: Judges the morality of an action based on virtues, rules, intent, values, etc (Kantian deontology)
    - Motivation of the action
    - A priori
  - Consequentialist: Judge the morality of an action based on its consequences (ex. Utilitarianism)
    - A Posteriori
    - Looks at the impacts of an action
  - The first ethical theory we will discuss is utilitarianism, a set of moral principles first devised by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century
    - Utilitarianism evaluates actions a posteriori based on their impact
    - In other words, it is a consequentialist philosophy

## Readings

- The difference between religion and non religion is that religious people have to justify their good and their bad => everyone has to choose their good and their bad
- We don't need religion to have morals

## Utilitarianism

- The greatest happiness for the greatest number
- Utilitarianism part of consequentialism
- Most influential consequentialism ideology
- Faced with the challenge of devising a rational system of morals, Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) came of with the principle of **utility**
  - Total happiness - total unhappiness = utility
- Create happiness in the world (increasing utility in the world)
- Used for animal rights
- Jeremy Bentham
  - Advocated: equal rights for woman, divorce, pro homosexuality, separate church and state, abolish slavery and death penalty
  - Got his body stuffed (taxedermie)
- Based on useful (how to be useful to society)
- Total happiness - Total unhappiness = Utility
  - Positive number => high moral worth
  - Negative number => no moral worth
- In order to understand this, we must first understand the basic premise behind the utilitarian belief:
  - All beings share a common desire to seek pleasure and avoid pain
    - They (pleasure and pain) govern us in everything that we do, the standard of right and wrong is "fastened to their throne"
  - Pleasure and pain are subjective

- Any individual act, or societal one, must thus seek to maximize “aggregate” pleasure and minimize “aggregate” pain, otherwise it is immoral
- According to Bentham, anyone who disagrees with this principle does not truly understand it
  - According to Bentham, there are simply no grounds to reject his core philosophical belief!
    - Every moral argument, at least implicitly, draws on the idea of happiness
    - In other words, there would be no ground for justifying any virtue or value, if respecting it did not maximize utility at least in the long run
- There are two qualities to happiness and pain: intensity, and duration. Hence, in order to calculate “aggregate” happiness or pain, one simply follows simple logic:
  - Intensity x duration x number of people affected = Total Happiness
- First theoretical application: The Trolley problem
  - Test theories under extreme scenarios
  - Option 1: Five workers are working on the original rail
  - Option 2: Conscious choice to change rail and run over 1 person
  - Utilitarian principle: Change track and run over 1 person over the original 5
- Second theoretical application: the City of Happiness
  - Based on short story “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”, written Ursula K Le Guin
- Torturing a suspect who planted a bomb in Montreal
  - Intensity: Pleasure of enjoying life over death (very great) (multiplied x)
  - Duration: Years of life left for victims (presumably a lot) (multiplied x)
  - Number of people: Hundreds, if not Thousand
  - Minus (-)
  - Intensity: Torture inflicts extremely intense pain (multiplied x)
  - Duration: A few hours (time necessary to get information) (multiplied x)
  - Number of people: just one
  - Equals?
- That being said, could we think of utilitarian arguments against torture?
  - However, it seems like numbers do make a difference, does it not? What if millions of lives are at stake?
- Now, is it possible we agree to this simply because the person whom the pain is inflicted upon is a suspected terrorist. someone for whom we do not feel much sympathy?
  - If so, what if we torture the terrorist’s daughter
  - This makes the city of happiness less crazy, does it not?
- Another possible objection to utilitarianism (besides the possible existence of **basic human rights**)
  - **One more objection: all pleasure are of equal worth**
    - All pleasure, all pains are the same => only differentiate by intensity, duration, number of people
      - How can we assign a number to pleasure?
  - **Can we translate moral goods into a single currency?**
    - If so what kind of currency?
    - Can we put a monetary value on a human life?
      - How much is one human life worth?
    - Money is a universal currency
    - According to U.S traffic law, it seems that a human life is worth 1.54 million \$
      - Oil Price Spike => brought down speed limits
        - Less deaths occurred with lower speed limits

- Faster time= efficiency (more productive)
  - Slower lose money but save lives
- So, this points towards a price on human life, whether we agree with it or not
- **One final objection: the rights of minority groups**
  - If hatred of said religion among the majority is passionate enough, surely it would outweigh the happiness and frustration of the minority group, no?
  - Some utilitarians will however argue that protecting the right of minorities does increase overall utility, not right away, but in the long run.
    - Minorities can provide services that majorities cannot so exterminating them would decrease the utility of a society
    - Society evolved in dogma and prejudice where minority beliefs are crushed and majority beliefs become facts
    - But isn't there something of moral worth missing in these utilitarian arguments?
- Act utilitarianism
  - One act that is justified
- Rule utilitarianism
  - Acts justified in the long run

### **Deontology (Kantian ethics)**

- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
  - Possibly the single most influential philosopher, let alone ethicist, since Aristotle
  - Kantian ethics are somewhat more complex and dry than utilitarianism, but we must do our best to understand them, because of how fundamental and influential they are
  - “You can philosophies with Kant, or philosophies against him, but you cannot philosophies without him”
  - Reading:
    - Why duty over pleasure/pain
      - We are rational unlike animals so we make rational decisions
    - Hypothetical imperative
      - Subjective mantra
      - Doing it for a certain reason
    - Categorical imperative
      - Doing it because it is always a good thing
  - Kant did not attribute dignity to non-human. Why?
    - Animals don't act autonomously so they cannot make rational decisions => they just follow their impulses
    - Still, some animal-rights activists and environmentalists use deontology as a basis for their argument. How?
- Fundamental notion: Humans are rational beings , worthy of dignity and respect
  - This basic idea is at the root of what used to be called the Rights of Man, or today, Universal Human Rights
  - This idea is elegant in its simplicity, but how Kant arrives at this notion is what is slightly more complicated...
- Kant's rejection of utilitarianism:

- Just because something causes pleasure doesn't mean it is right
- Just because a law is favoured by a majority, no matter how intensely doesn't make that law just
- Basing morality on interests and preferences is contingent to changing factors
  - It does not help us distinguish between right and wrong, but "only to become better at calculation"
- Pleasure and pain are not our only sovereign masters, as Bentham put it
  - As rational beings, we also possess the capacity to act according to reason (a faculty that sets us apart from non-human creatures)
  - A solid system of ethics must recognize this fact
- Kant's ethics are therefore based on freedom
  - Not any kind of freedom however
  - Kant sees freedom, as the capacity to act autonomously
- Acting heteronomously vs autonomously
  - Autonomously is not acting in order of your preference like buying one product over another
  - To act autonomously is to live according to a law that we give ourselves, to do something for its own sake
  - It is this capacity that makes persons distinct from things
  - It is this capacity that gives us our dignity
- **Dignity**
  - Born with => intrinsic
  - Basic intrinsic worth
  - Since we can act autonomously we should be treated with respect
  - Right to dispose of ourselves
  - Use someone as a means to an ends does not respect their dignity
    - You cannot use people as a tool
  - Due to their capacity to act autonomously, persons possess dignity. They are born with it, and they die with it. It can be violated, but it can never be taken away
    - This is not rule utilitarianism
    - How does it differ?
- How, then, do we establish the moral worth of an action, according to Kant?
  - Easy! The moral worth of an action flows not from its consequences, but from the intention from which the act is done.
  - One important consequence to this however: for an action to be good, it is not enough that it should conform to the moral law- it must also be done for the sake of the moral law!
    - GOOD WILL! => Acting out of duty, not self interest
  - Intention that matters not consequence (motivation > consequence)
    - Cheat because you do not want to get caught
    - Doing something for the praises
  - Don't be Tahani => do something for the moral principles => **moral worth lies in the intention**
    - Respect the maxim not because you fear the consequence
    - Doing something for the right reasons
    - Motivated by **good will**
  - Good Will: Acting out of duty, not self interest
- But all of this does not tell us what Kant is really after: What is the supreme principle of morality?
  - To understand this, we must first contrast hypothetical imperatives from categorical imperatives
    - Hypothetical imperative: If you want X, then do Y

- Subjective => change per person
- Categorical imperative: A practical law that by itself commands absolutely and without further motives
  - Moral principle that does not need to be justified
- For Kant, the categorical imperative is the only one from which we can derive universal moral principles
- Kant provides us with two fundamental formulations of the categorical imperative
  - Actually four but the last two derive from the first two, so
  - 1. Universalize your maxim
    - “Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should be a universal law”
      - Universal law that applies all the time
      - It’s a test for the maxim
      - But wait, isn’t this the **golden rule**?
        - Treat others the way you want to be treated
        - Golden rule contingent on what you want
      - And the universalization process, isn't that consequentialist?
      - But no and no
  - 2. Treat people as ends (not as means)
    - “Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.”
    - In other words, people have dignity. Thus, you cannot use them to arrive at your own ends, however just they may be
- Let’s think back to our price gouging example
- Kant POV
  - Means to profit out of human despair
    - Using consumer for ultimate goal of attracting more resources and more profit
  - maxim: In times of emergency, increase prices
    - Principle of value would mean nothing
  - Dignity => basic right to water, shelter, food
- Utilitarian POV
  - More people would have supplies since price gouging encourages rationing
    - More people have supplies => more people happy
- Foreshadow
  - What are the possible application of utilitarianism for environmental ethics?
    - All beings are equal => animal activism (pleasure and pain)
    - Cost benefit calculations
  - What are the possible applications of deontology for environmental ethics?
    - Universalization: Do what benefits you now not the future (not universalizable)
    - Duty to protect the environment => to protect human habitat
      - Everything is interconnected
      - Almost impossible to calculate value of aspects of environment

## **Libertarianism**

- The libertarian formula of ethics is the simplest so far

- Maximize liberty!!!=> individual freedom
- Dispose of themselves and their wealth provided they respect other people's liberty
- Persons have a fundamental, inviolable right to liberty: the right to do whatever they want with themselves and the things they own, provided they respect other persons' right to do the same.
- Classic moral issue: income redistribution
  - As you probably know, 1% of Americans possess as much wealth as the bottom 90% of American families
  - Top 1% owns 43% of total financial wealth
- A utilitarian argument: taxing the rich to increase overall utility, until extra taxation reduce utility (optimal)
- 2 counter-arguments to "Robin Hood" scenario
  - Utilitarian: taxation can reduce incentive to work, therefore reducing the "size of the pie" (overall utility)
    - Less wealth for everyone
  - Libertarian: utilitarian argument is beside the point. Taxing is wrong because it is coercive. It violates the fundamental right of persons to do whatever they want with their money
- Crosby: Earns 10.9 million that comes from ticket sales (viewers know that \$ goes in Sydney's salary)
  - 1/3 goes to gov in taxes (for redistribution justice)=> 1/3 of his games are played for the gov
  - Can the gov force him to play 1/3 games after he retired
  - To libertarians, this makes the government part owner of Crosby's labour, and therefore part owner of him!
  - If I own myself, I own my labour, I must own the fruits of my labour
  - This, to libertarians is tantamount to part-time slavery
  - What if Crosby retires and gov forces him to play 1/3 of his games
    - If they cannot force him to play then how can they force him to give up 1/3 of his money he makes playing hockey
- 5 objections to this libertarian line of argument
  1. Taxation is not as bad as forced labour
    - You still have choices.. You don't have to work more
    - Still, the gov forces you to make that choice
  2. The poor need the money more
    - Does this make it okay to "steal" from the rich?
  3. Crosby does not play alone
    - He owes a debt to those who contribute to his success
  4. As a citizen of a democracy, Crosby has a voice in making the laws that require him to pay taxes
    - The law can still be unfair... (think back to our utilitarian argument about the rights of minorities, for example)
  5. Sidney Crosby is lucky
    - Lucky to have this talent, lucky to live in a society which prizes this talent
    - The community therefore makes no injustice in taxing him
- So, what is the libertarian political platform?
  - No **Paternalism**
    - No laws to protect people from harming themselves (i.e. helmet and seatbelt laws, drug laws, etc)
  - No **Morals Legislation**:
    - What people do in their home is their prerogative

- Libertarians therefore oppose any and all laws that promote forms of virtues or moral convictions of majority
- However! if private owners wish to ban homosexuals, blacks or jews from their establishment, it is also their right to do so.
- No **Redistribution of Wealth**
  - Wealthy can help the poor by private charity if they wish
- Only **Minimal Government**
  - Government, by definition, limits individual freedoms
  - It should be limited to enforcing contracts, protecting private property, and keeping peace
- Two tests for libertarianism:
  1. Should we be allowed to sell our own kidneys
  2. Consensual cannibalism
    - Consensual cannibalism is an extreme form of assisted suicide
    - If libertarianism is right, banning consensual cannibalism is a violation of our right to liberty, to dispose of our bodies however we please.

### **The “veil of ignorance” (John Rawls)**

- John Rawls (1921-2002)
  - In A Theory of Justice (1971), Rawls proposes a new vision of moral philosophy, which has become very influential
  - It proposes a thought experiment, which has come to be refereed to as the “veil ignorance”
  - John Rawls proposes that a “just” society is one based on principles that we would have agreed to an initial situation of equality.
  - The “veil of ignorance” is of course simply a mental exercise, but it should inform our thinking about ethics!
  - Two principles should emerge from this idea:
    - Basic individual freedoms (of religion, of sexual orientation) and equality (of gender, of race, of age)
    - Social and economic equality: Not necessarily pure redistribution of wealth, but at the very least a system which permits only those inequalities which work to the benefit of the least well off