

# Deontology & Social Contract Theory

January 23rd, 2018

# Homework 1 Discussion

Volunteers?

# Utilitarianism Review

# Utilitarianism Review

- ▶ Principle of Utility (Greatest Happiness Principle)
  - ▶ "An act is right (or wrong) to the extent that it increases (or decreases) the total happiness of all affected parties."
- ▶ The intention behind an act does not matter - only its consequences.
- ▶ Two forms of utilitarianism:
  - ▶ **Act utilitarianism:** calculate utility for each action
  - ▶ **Rule utilitarianism:** adopt moral rules which, if followed by everyone, will lead to the greatest happiness

# Utilitarianism Upsides

- ▶ Focused on happiness
- ▶ Practical
- ▶ Comprehensive
  - ▶ Takes into account all possible effects

# Utilitarianism Downsides

- ▶ Calculating overall happiness is complicated in practice
  - ▶ Have to chose appropriate boundaries
    - ▶ Time boundaries
    - ▶ Who is an affected party?
  - ▶ Forces the use of a single scale for disparate things
- ▶ Ignores unjust distribution of benefits / costs

# Deontology (Kantianism)

# Deontology

- ▶ Dictionary definition: “the theory or study of moral obligation”
  - ▶ Normative ethical position that judges the morality of an action based on rules
  - ▶ From Greek root “deont” -> That which is binding



# Deontology

- ▶ Morality is based on reason
  - ▶ An act is right iff it conforms to the relevant moral obligation; and it is wrong iff it violates the relevant moral obligation.
- ▶ Unlike utilitarianism: the consequences of an action are irrelevant to moral evaluation
- ▶ The value of an action lies in motive - especially motives of obligation.

# Kantianism

- ▶ Based on the writing of philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724 - 1804)
  - ▶ People should be guided by universal moral laws. Must be based on reason.
- ▶ The only thing that is good without qualification is **good will**.
  - ▶ Morality derived from this starting premise.
- ▶ A person has good will only if the motive of his or her action is based on moral obligation, derived from universally valid norms.

# Kantian imperatives

- ▶ An **imperative** is a way that reason commands the will
- ▶ Two types of imperatives:
  - ▶ Hypothetical
    - ▶ If I want to obtain  $e$ , then I must obtain means  $m$
  - ▶ Categorical
    - ▶ An imperative that has no exceptions

# Kantian perspective on imperatives

- ▶ Kant believed that hypothetical imperatives could not persuade moral action because they are based too heavily on subjective considerations.
  - ▶ Part of the reason why he was dissatisfied with utilitarianism / consequentialism.
  - ▶ They tell us which means to best achieve our ends, but do not tell us which ends we should choose.
- ▶ Difference between “right” (moral obligations) and “good” (positive consequences for actions)
  - ▶ “Good” is irrelevant

# The Categorical Imperative

- ▶ The Categorical Imperative in Kantianism is moral law that every moral agent recognizes whenever accepting an act as morally obligatory.
- ▶ Two (equivalent) formulations of the Kantian Categorical Imperative.

# Categorical Imperative: Formulation One

- ▶ Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws.
  - ▶ In layman's terms: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you
- ▶ Remember: Kant's argument is not based on consequences. He argues that breaking the categorical imperative is illogical / against reason.

# Class Discussion: Lying

Using the first formulation of the categorical imperative, show that lying is against reason.

# Categorical Imperative: Formulation Two

- ▶ Act so that you always treat both yourself and other people as ends in themselves and never only as a means to an end.
  - ▶ In layman's terms: Treat others how you wish to be treated.
- ▶ Two formulations are thought to be equivalent to each other.



# Class Discussion: Hiring people under false pretenses

Using the second formulation of the categorical imperative, show that this is against reason.

## Class Discussion: The Stop Sign as a Kantian

You are driving out in the desert. You can see in all directions for miles. No one else is around. You see a stop sign. Do you stop? Why or why not?



# Class activity: Stealing food to feed starving children

- ▶ You are an able-bodied adult, but have little money. You come across impoverished, starving children. There's a grocery store nearby, but you can't afford to buy any extra food.
- ▶ According to Kantianism, is it right to steal food to feed starving children?

# Kantianism advantages

- ▶ Rational
- ▶ Universal
  - ▶ Not dependent on the particulars of a given situation
  - ▶ All people are treated equal
- ▶ Appeals to our innate sense of “duty”

# Kantianism disadvantages

- ▶ It's rarely the case that a single rule characterizes an action
  - ▶ There's no way to resolve conflict among rules
    - ▶ e.g., stealing vs lying vs helping others in need
- ▶ Allows for no exceptions
  - ▶ Lies that save social face (e.g., the bad haircut)

# Perfect vs imperfect duties

- ▶ To help resolve conflicts between some rules, Kant made a distinction between “perfect” and “imperfect” duties.
- ▶ Perfect duties must be followed always.
  - ▶ “Thou shall nots,” (e.g., no stealing, no lying)
  - ▶ No exceptions
- ▶ Imperfect duties must be followed only if they do not conflict with perfect duties.
  - ▶ Helping others
  - ▶ Cultivating your skills

# Social Contract Theory

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# Social contract theory

- ▶ Based on the writings of English philosopher Thomas Hobbes.
- ▶ Lived during the civil war and saw the consequences of social anarchy.
- ▶ In his book, *Leviathan*, Hobbes states: “In a state of nature, no one would do anything productive because someone else would just ruin it”



# Social contract theory

- ▶ Moral rules are “simply the rules that are necessary if we are to gain the benefits of social living.”
  - ▶ Basic idea: Everyone agrees to give up some liberties (e.g., obey property rights) in order to reap the benefits of a civilized society
- ▶ We need two things:
  - ▶ A set of moral rules to govern relations among citizens
  - ▶ A government capable of enforcing them

# Morality according to social contract theory

Morality is the set of rules that rational people will agree to obey, for their mutual benefit, provided that other people will obey them as well.

# Reason for making rules is different

- ▶ **Kantianism:** Can the rule be universalized without resulting in a logical inconsistency?
- ▶ **Rule Utilitarianism:** Does the rule result in the greatest happiness?
- ▶ **Social Contract Theory:** Would rational people collectively accept the rule as binding because of its benefit to the community?

# Application of rules is different

- ▶ **Kantianism:** Evaluate the rule against the categorical imperative.
- ▶ **Rule Utilitarianism:** Calculate total happiness.
- ▶ **Social Contract Theory:** Evaluate the agreed upon “rights” of the rational agents involved.

The background features abstract, overlapping green geometric shapes, primarily triangles and polygons, in various shades of green, creating a modern, layered effect on the right side of the slide.

How do we form the social contract?

# The language of rights

- ▶ Negative right: freedoms / liberties (example: free speech)
- ▶ Positive right: obligations to you from others, and to others from you (example: free education, healthcare)
- ▶ Absolute right: guaranteed without exception
- ▶ Limited right: Restricted under some circumstances
- ▶ Negative rights are usually absolute
- ▶ Positive rights are usually limited

# Rawl's 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.
  - ▶ Examples: freedom of thought and speech, freedom of association, the right to be safe from harm, and the right to own property,
- ▶ Any social and economic inequalities must satisfy two conditions:
  - ▶ They are associated with positions in society that everyone has a fair and equal opportunity to assume
  - ▶ They are “to be of the greatest benefit to the least-advantaged members of society” (difference principle)



## Class Discussion: The Stop Sign with Social Contract Theory

You are driving out in the desert. You can see in all directions for miles. No one else is around. You see a stop sign. Do you stop? Why or why not?





# Group activity: The Proxy Server

- ▶ Your company has blocked access to sports websites. You have access to a proxy server. You want to read ESPN on your lunch hour.
- ▶ According to SCT, is it ethical for you to access your proxy server to access ESPN? Why or why not?
- ▶ What if, instead of ESPN, it was an “adult” website?

# SCT Advantages

- ▶ It is framed in the language of rights
- ▶ Has explanatory power:
  - ▶ Explains why people act in self interest in the absence of an agreement
    - ▶ “tragedy of the commons”
  - ▶ Explains why civil disobedience is sometimes ethical

# SCT Disadvantages

- ▶ None of us signed the contract
- ▶ Doesn't explain what to do when you have conflicting rights
  - ▶ Difficult to apply to dilemmas
- ▶ May be unfair to people who can't hold up their side of the contract