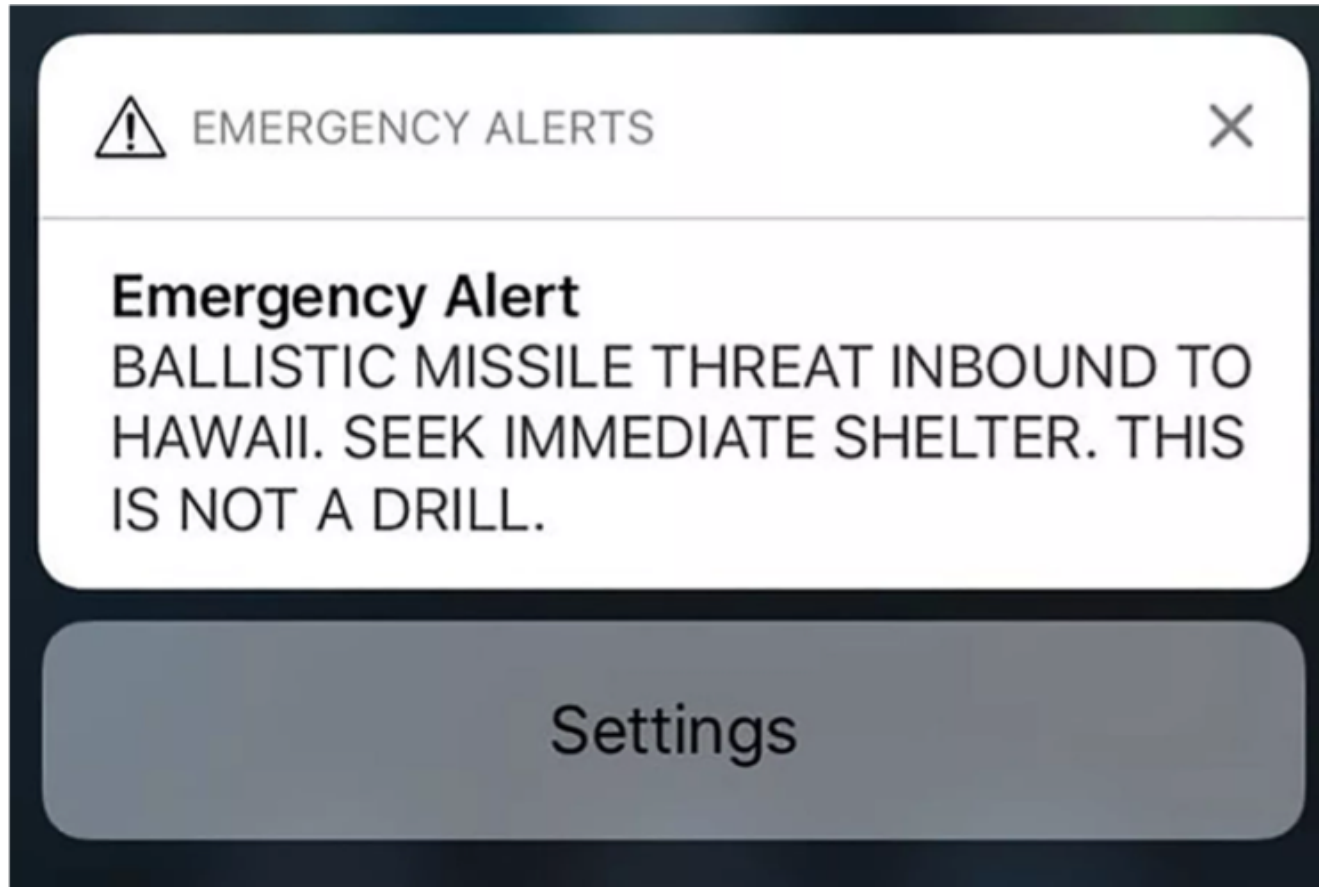


Relativism & Utilitarianism

January 17th, 2018

On January 13th, 2018, residents of Hawaii received the following message on their phones.



38 minutes later, they learned it was a false alarm.

1. State EOC

1. TEST Message

DRILL-PACOM (DEMO) STATE ONLY

False Alarm BMD (CEM) - STATE ONLY

Monthly Test (RMT) - STATE ONLY

PACOM (CDW) - STATE ONLY

Ethics & Morality

- ▶ Every society has rules of conduct that define what people *ought* and ought *not* to do in different situations. We call these rules **morality**.
- ▶ **Ethics** is the philosophical study of morality, a rational examination into people's moral beliefs and behaviors.
 - ▶ It studies free human acts from the point of view of their moral value (their goodness or badness)

The goal of ethics?

- ▶ To obtain true and systematic knowledge of upright and authentic human behavior based on universal principles.
- ▶ To establish a series of norms and criteria for judging human acts.
- ▶ To study the basic truths about the human nature.
- ▶ To establish guiding principles that facilitate life in a community or society.
- ▶ To come up with practices and customs that foster responsible and good habits in a personal conduct.

No clear answers

- ▶ Can argue many aspects of human behavior from multiple perspectives
- ▶ What is “right” and “wrong”?

Class Activity: Wrong vs harm

- ▶ Can you give an example of something that causes harm, but isn't "wrong"?
- ▶ Can you give an example of something that is "wrong", but doesn't cause harm?

Ethical theories give you different ways
to think through problems.

The background features abstract, overlapping green geometric shapes, primarily triangles and polygons, in various shades of green, creating a modern and dynamic visual effect.

Relativism & Cultural Relativism

Subjective Relativism

- ▶ Morality is not a universal law, like gravity; it is not something that can be observed and measured, so rational people cannot discover or try to understand it
- ▶ We each create our own morality. Ethical debates are pointless, because there is no “universal truth”

Problems with Subjective Relativism

- ▶ The line between doing what is “right” vs what you “want” is thin
- ▶ There is no moral distinction between the actions of different people
 - ▶ The actions of someone like Adolf Hitler is as “right” as someone like Martin Luther King Jr.
- ▶ The idea of tolerance is inconsistent with this theory
- ▶ It is not based on reason -- people are good at legitimizing bad behaviors

Unworkable

Cultural Relativism

- ▶ Okay okay okay, maybe everyone doesn't get to make their own morality, but at least individual societies and cultures can do so.
- ▶ Individual societies and cultures can decide for themselves what's 'right' and 'wrong' and other societies and cultures should stay out of it.

Class discussion: Testifying against a friend

- ▶ Your friend was given a speeding ticket. You were in the car and know he was speeding. He's challenging it in court. You are a witness.
 - ▶ Would you testify that your friend was not speeding? Why or why not?

Class discussion: Testifying against a friend

- ▶ Results are culturally dependent:
 - ▶ 90% of Norwegians would not lie about it
 - ▶ 75% of Americans and Canadians
 - ▶ 50% of Mexicans
 - ▶ 10% of Yugoslavians

Group discussion: Can we ever say the values of another culture are "wrong"?

- ▶ Sati: Widow self-immolating herself on her husband's funeral pyre
- ▶ In response to a drought:
 - ▶ Culture A: builds aqueduct
 - ▶ Culture B: sacrifices someone to the rain god

Problems with cultural relativism

- ▶ No explanatory power
 - ▶ Doesn't help us understand how one group creates its standards
 - ▶ Doesn't explain why moral guidelines evolve
 - ▶ Doesn't explain how to resolve conflicts between cultures
- ▶ Cannot decide which standards are best

Unworkable

Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism

- ▶ Also called “consequentialism”
- ▶ 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.

Act Utilitarianism: The algorithm

- ▶ For each human act, calculate its utility:
 - ▶ Sum benefits over *all* parties that benefit.
 - ▶ Sum costs over *all* parties that incur costs.
 - ▶ If total benefit > total cost, the act is “good”. Else, it’s “bad”.

Class Discussion: The Stop Sign with Act Utilitarianism

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 Discussion: Facebook Premium as an Act Utilitarian

As a high-level product manager at Facebook, you must decide if Facebook should release a “premium” ad-free, tracking-free service for customers willing to pay \$10/month.

Benefits of Act Utilitarianism

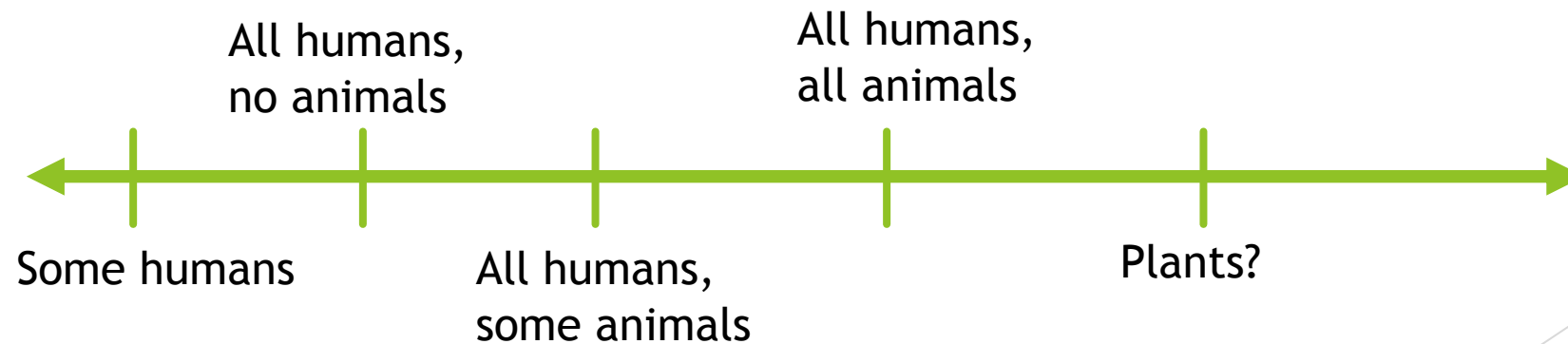
- ▶ It focuses on happiness
- ▶ It is practical
 - ▶ e.g, at which location in a city should a new prison be built?
- ▶ It is comprehensive
 - ▶ Allows the moral agent to take into account all elements of a particular situation
 - ▶ e.g., truthfully answering your partner's question if their bad haircut looks good

Problems with Act Utilitarianism

- ▶ Hard to calculate the utility of an act
 - ▶ Have to choose bounds
 - ▶ Who is an affected party?
 - ▶ How far in the future should we look?
 - ▶ We can't always easily predict the outcome / consequences of an act
 - ▶ Susceptible to 'moral luck'
 - ▶ Forces us to use a single scale or measure for disparate things

Who is an affected party?

- ▶ Which beings are “morally relevant”?
 - ▶ At one point in this country, only white men
 - ▶ Animals?
 - ▶ Plants?



Who is an affected party?

- ▶ How many indirectly affected parties do we include?
 - ▶ In Facebook example:
 - ▶ Do we include friends / spouses of those who pay / don't pay?
 - ▶ Do we include employees of advertising companies who will lose revenue?

Setting time bounds

- ▶ How far in the future should we look?
 - ▶ In Facebook example - the amount of data companies collect about you could potentially impact your children, too.
- ▶ If you offer someone a job, how far in the future is that person's earnings countable as a benefit of your act?
 - ▶ If they switch jobs, does their earnings in their new job count? Perhaps they could only get that new job because they had the experience from the job you offered.

We can't always predict the outcomes of an act

- ▶ Often times, we don't know / can't measure all of the consequences of our actions
- ▶ Susceptible to 'moral luck'
 - ▶ If you send flowers to someone in the hospital, but they're (unbeknownst to you) allergic to those flowers, that still counts against you
 - ▶ Social networking platforms were made to facilitate online communication. They are also being used to manipulate and deceive.

Forces us to use a single scale or measure for disparate things

- ▶ Some benefits and costs may be concrete (e.g., dollars earned, lost)
- ▶ Other benefits and costs are more abstract (e.g., happiness, privacy)
- ▶ How do we collapse all these disparate units into a single scale?

Problems with Act Utilitarianism

- ▶ Hard to calculate the utility of an act
 - ▶ Have to choose bounds
 - ▶ Who is an affected party?
 - ▶ How far in the future should we look?
 - ▶ We can't always easily predict the outcome / consequences of an act
 - ▶ Susceptible to 'moral luck'
 - ▶ Forces us to use a single scale or measure for disparate things
- ▶ Doesn't account for our 'innate sense of duty'
 - ▶ Might be okay to break promises if breaking a promise produces more happiness
 - ▶ There are no absolute rights

It's okay to break promises

- ▶ You made a promise to your spouse that you would be in town for their birthday.
- ▶ Later, you get a job interview for your dream job, but you have to travel on your spouse's birthday.
- ▶ Breaking the promise:
 - ▶ 1000 units of unhappiness for your spouse.
 - ▶ 1001 units of happiness for you.

There are no individual rights

- ▶ We can kill one person and harvest their organs to save the lives of 10 other people.

Rule Utilitarianism

- ▶ Adopt moral rules which, if followed by everyone, will lead to the greatest happiness
 - ▶ E.g., “Promises should be kept”, “Parents should take care of their children”, “Murder is not allowed under any circumstances”, etc.

Rule Utilitarianism: Advantages

- ▶ Performing the utilitarian calculus is simpler
 - ▶ Not every moral decision requires calculating consequences of an individual action
- ▶ Exceptional situations don't overthrow moral rules
 - ▶ a rule utilitarian would argue that the utility of everyone keeping their promises outweighs the benefit of someone breaking a promise in a particular situation
 - ▶ Solves the problem of moral luck
- ▶ Solves the problem of bias
 - ▶ Instead of asking “is it OK for me to do this,” ask “is it OK for everyone to do this”

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As a product manager at Facebook, you must decide if Facebook should release a “premium” ad-free service for customers willing to pay \$10/month.

Rule Utilitarianism: Problems

- ▶ Still difficult to perform utilitarian calculus
 - ▶ Still forces us to use single scale to measure disparate things
- ▶ Ignores the problem of unjust distribution of benefit or harm
 - ▶ Increase one person's happiness by 1000 units vs 50 people's by 10 units
 - ▶ Facebook might get a lot more money, but a premium ad-free service might exacerbate the digital divide