Theoretical underpinnings of Ethics

* The hallmark of ethical thinking: “recognition that there are appropriate interests other than your own, that should act as constraints on unbridled pursuit of self-interest”. Ethics costs, it’s giving up something that can benefit you for someone else.
* There is a winner and a loser in almost every ethical problem. If you can **turn it into a non-ethical problem (not unethical)** then it could be a win-win. If benefits can be mutual, then there is no longer an ethical problem.
* Prescriptive ethics: reaches a view about what should be done, how we should behave
  + Normative ethics and General principles (do unto others as you would have them do to you, act to produce the most happiness/utility)
  + Normative Issues (specific issues like abortion, less generality)
  + Moralizing (yes/no answer to an actual ethical situation, most specific)
  + An example: He should **not** have taken the money (moralizing), because it was stealing and **stealing is bad** (issue), and stealing causes **unhappiness** (general principle is to maximize happiness)
  + **You must be able to supply each of these for an ethical argument**. When you make an ethical standpoint, you imply you have the answers to each of these steps. You cannot just say “it just is/isn’t ethical”.
  + A ethical viewpoint is non-negotiable. You don’t hold a referendum to decide if a group of people have human rights, they just do. This doesn’t mean you cannot change your ethical viewpoint; it just means you wont because of negotiation i.e. a moral issue is too important to negotiate and reach a middle ground about, it MUST be the one way, the moral way.
* Rules vs consequences (outcomes) – answer to the question: what should I do?
* Public vs private morality (what you should do as an individual normally vs what you do as an individual who is filling a role e.g. lawyer must maintain confidentiality, someone who overhears lawyer’s conversation doesn’t)
* Virtues: answer to the question: what type of person should I be?
* Consequential: forwards looking, what will happen/be produced?
* Non-consequential: backwards or present looking. I should do x because I made a promise to, or because it is fair/right/my duty/I’m contractually obligated to.
* The big 3 are consequential (Mills), non-consequential (Kant), and virtue
* Kant
  + Morals must not be about consequences. The only good thing is a thing that was done out of good will, it cannot be a mistake or unintentional. This doesn’t mean a good will is the only important thing, because the road to hell is paved with good intentions, but rather, the act must be good and intended to have happened. It’s the difference between: was the act good? Vs was the act good and intentional?
  + **Duty** is the **central notion of morality** is his view. Everything can be related back to a principle or moral.
  + Second formulation: Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only. This is a requirement to respect people and recognize they are a person. Other people should be the end (the reason for doing things), and not only a means (don’t just use people). It is okay for people to be part of the means though.
* Mills
  + “actions are right in proportions as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness”. This is the utilitarian perspective.
  + This is the polar opposite to Kant. All that Mills considers when deciding if something is ethical or not is the outcome/consequences. If pleasure/happiness is maximized, then that is the ethical decision.
* Ross (middle-man, has a crossover of both Mills and Kant)
  + Prima facie duties (on the surface)
* Moral pluralism
  + There is no single moral theory or principle that should be accepted as correct or accepted over others. There are many equally valid theories.
  + This is not moral relativism! This is saying combine the outcomes of considering it from a duties and consequences perspective to come to an answer.
* Pure procedural justice: whether it is just or not doesn’t depend on the outcome, but rather the procedure. If the procedure is just, then all outcomes are taken as just e.g. flipping a coin, I could win every time, but because it was equal chance that is a just outcome (Even though you never won).
* Moral issue are not problems that can be solved. It is not the same at 8+4=12 where there is an exact precise answer. They are dilemmas that we can navigate through, and the outcomes of such navigations will be better or worse. They way we navigate is by using the equally valid ethical strategies outlined above. You can come up with an answer that you argue is better than any other answer, but you cannot argue it is actually correct.

Lecture 1 – Theoretical underpinnings of ethics

**Key point 1: What is, and what is not, ethics?**

Ethics, specifically prescriptive ethics, is the philosophy of deciding right from wrong. It aims to answer the questions “What should I do?” and “What kind of person should I be?”. The key in answering these questions is considering the interests of others, rather than acting purely out of self-interest. This is not to be confused with descriptive ethics which investigates what people **think** is okay.

Ethics is also not moral relativism. Moral relativism argues that ethics are contextual to time and place. The problem with relativism is it either simply describes what happened (descriptive) or it accepts all different views as equally correct (normative), which isn’t ethical because it isn’t actually distinguishing right from wrong e.g. just because slavery was once tolerated, doesn’t mean it should have been - it was always morally wrong.

**Key point 2: Ethical arguments and their considerations**

Ethical issues are not problems. They cannot be solved in the same way equations can. Instead they are dilemmas that we can navigate through, where some paths are better than others.It should be noted, however, that if it is possible to turn an ethical situation into a non-ethical (not unethical) situation, then this should be done as this essentially means turning it into a no-loss situation (no one’s interests are violated). All valid ethical arguments must moralize an actual yes or no answer that relates back to a normative issue, which in turn relates back to a general principle. For example, “he should **not** have taken the money (moralizing), because it was **stealing, which is bad** (issue), and stealing **minimizes happiness** (general principle)”. On top of these requirements, they must not be political, prudential, artistic, preferential, or negotiable.

**Key point 3: Kant, the deontological perspective**

This perspective aims to answer the question, “what should I do?”. Kant argues that the only good acts are acts that are done out of a good will. It’s the difference between “were your intentions good?” and “was the act good and intentional?”. Kant believed the central notion of morality that should be used to decide whether an act is good is duty, stating this can always be related back to a general principle. This places morality on acts themselves, and not the consequences of such acts.

**Key point 4: Mills, the teleological perspective**

This perspective also aims to answer the question, “what should I do?”. Mills argues that all that matters when deciding if an act is ethical or not is the consequences of said action. Consequences are most often ranked by how much they maximize something, most commonly happiness (the utilitarian perspective). The degree to which an action is right is proportional to the sum of its consequences.

**Key point 5: Values, the virtuous perspective**

This perspective aims to answer a different question, “What type of person should I be?”. This pertains specifically to virtues, the qualities that enable us to function well as humans. These are universally accepted to include honesty, integrity, fairness, compassion, and openness. Aristotle came up with the golden mean, a method for building a virtuous character, which essentially meant feeling the right amount. For example, you should not be rash (too much), nor should you be cowardly (too little), but you should be courageous. Once you do it enough, he argued it will become a habit and part of your character, then you will do it by default and no longer have to ask, “what should I do?”. Plato similarly advocated for focusing on being a good individual, as a good society will naturally come of this.

No single one of these moral perspectives should be accepted as correct or accepted over others. There are many equally valid theories, which is known as moral pluralism.