

Lecture 2

Ethics: Theories, Analysis and
Decision Making

The Ethical Point of View

- Most everyone shares “core values”, desiring:
 - Life
 - Happiness
 - Ability to accomplish goals
- Two ways to view world
 - Selfish point of view: consider only own self and its core values
 - Ethical point of view: respect other people and their core values

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Good Ethical Theory Supports Persuasive, Logical Arguments



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Ethics: A definition

- About intrinsic human good and the moral choices that realize those goods.
 - Example: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”
 - Example: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”
- Meta-level principles with universal validity

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Social Behavior and Ethics

- Four constraints regulating ethical behavior
 - Law: Rules imposed by government, enforced by sanctions
 - Norms: Cultural acceptance of behavior, enforced by stigmatizing
 - The Market: Regulated by prices set for goods, services and labor
 - Real world time and space (architecture): Physical limitations of human behavior
 - Code creates constraints for “virtual” reality

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Example: Pornography

- Law
 - Legal in US to obtain pornography, except where the subjects are children
- Norms
 - Soft-core vs. Hard-core Porn
 - Adults vs. Children as consumers
- The Market
 - \$10 billion in US
- Architecture vs Code
 - Brick & Mortar Stores vs. Internet

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Types of Ethical Thinking

- From the basis of
 - Utilitarianism
 - Moral Rights (Kantianism)
 - Justice (Fairness)
 - Common Good
 - Virtue

1) Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism

- Morally right course of action in any situation is the one that produces the greatest balance of benefits over harms for everyone affected.
 - Can focus on individual actions or moral rules
- If a course of action produces maximum benefits for everyone, utilitarianism does not care whether the benefits are produced by lies, manipulation, or coercion.
- Morality of an action has nothing to do with intent
 - Focuses on the consequences

Anti-Worm Scenario

- August 2003: Blaster worm infected thousands of Windows computers
- Soon after, Nachi worm appeared
 - Took control of vulnerable computer
 - Located and destroyed copies of Blaster
 - Downloaded software patch to fix security problem
 - Used computer as launching pad to try to “infect” other vulnerable PCs

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Evaluation using Rule Utilitarianism

- Proposed rule: If I can write a helpful worm that removes a harmful worm from infected computers and shields them from future attacks, I should do so
- Who would benefit
 - People who do not keep their systems updated
- Who would be harmed
 - People who use networks
 - People who’s computers are invaded by buggy anti-worms
 - System administrators
- Conclusion: Harm outweighs benefits. Releasing anti-worm is wrong.

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Case For/Against Utilitarianism

- All consequences must be measured on a single scale.
 - All units must be the same in order to do the sum
 - In certain circumstances utilitarians must quantify the value of a human life
- Utilitarianism ignores the problem of an unjust distribution of good consequences.
 - Utilitarianism does **not** mean “the greatest good of the greatest number”
 - That requires a principle of justice
 - What happens when a conflict arises between the principle of utility and a principle of justice?
- Despite weaknesses, utilitarianism is a workable ethical theories and can complement other types of ethical theories

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2) Moral Rights

Moral Rights

- “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” (American Declaration of Independence)
- All human beings have “the right to own property,...the right to work,...the right to just and favorable remuneration,...[and] the right to rest and leisure.” (UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights)

Moral Rights continued

- What is a right? A right is a justified claim on others.
- The “justification” of a claim is dependent on some standard acknowledged and accepted not just by the claimant, but also by society in general.
- Can be positive (positive assistance of others) or negative (non-interference from others)
 - Right to basic education
 - Right to be secure in my own home

EXAMPLE: DVD Rental Scenario

- Bill owns chain of DVD rental stores
- Collects information about rentals from customers
- Constructs profiles of customers
- Sells profiles to direct marketing firms
- Some customers happy to receive more mail order catalogs; others unhappy at increase in "junk mail"

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Evaluation using Moral Rights

- Consider rights of Bill, customers, and mail order companies.
- Does customer have right to expect name, address to be kept confidential?
- If customer rents DVD 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.

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Case for Moral Rights

- Framed in language of rights
- Explains why people act in self-interest without common agreement
- Provides clear analysis of certain citizen/ government problems
- Workable ethical theory

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Case Against Moral Rights

- No one signed contract
- Some actions have multiple characterizations
- Conflicting rights problem
- May unjustly treat people who cannot uphold contract
- Despite weaknesses, a workable theory

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3) Justice (Fairness)

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)

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Justice continued

- “Individuals should be treated the same, unless they differ in ways that are relevant to the situation in which they are involved.”
 - For example, if Jack and Jill both do the same work, and there are no relevant differences between them or the work they are doing, then in justice they should be paid the same wages.
 - If Jack is paid more than Jill simply because he is a man, or because he is white, then we have an injustice—a form of discrimination—because unjust to give individuals special treatment on the basis of age, sex, race, or their religious preferences. Race and gender are not relevant to normal work situations.

Justice continued

- Justifiable criteria for treating people differently:
 - When a parent gives his or her own children more attention and care in his or her private affairs than he or she gives the children of others
 - When the person who is first in a line at a theater is given first choice of theater tickets
 - When the government gives benefits to the needy that it does not provide to more affluent citizens
 - When some who have done wrong are given punishments that are not meted out to others who have done nothing wrong
 - When those who exert more efforts or who make a greater contribution to a project receive more benefits from the project than others
- These criteria—need, deserving, contribution, and effort—we acknowledge are numerous.

Example: Health and Work

- Worker in cotton mill develops brown lung disease after years of work
 - Man worked 21 years at mill
 - Developed brown lung in his early 60’s
 - Fired from mill because he couldn’t work
 - No pension, no income, no health care
- Evaluation of justice: Employer caused the disease, therefore the mill owes compensation

For/Against Justice

- Justice creates social stability, interdependence and dignity
- Do our actions treat all others equally?
 - If not, then is difference justified?
- Cannot be only type of evaluation, sometimes must over-ride in favor of rights or society's welfare

4) Common Good

Common Good

- "We face a choice between a society where people accept modest sacrifices for a common good or a more contentious society where groups selfishly protect their own benefits."
- Appeals to the common good have also surfaced in discussions of:
 - business' social responsibilities, discussions of environmental pollution,
 - our lack of investment in education
 - the problems of crime and poverty
 - Everywhere, it seems, social commentators are claiming that our most fundamental social problems grow out of a widespread pursuit of individual interests.

5) Virtue

Virtue

- Aristotle
 - Happiness results from living a life of virtue
 - Intellectual virtue: developed through education
 - Moral virtue: developed by repeating appropriate acts
 - Deriving pleasure from a virtuous act is a sign that the virtue has been acquired
- Some virtues: Benevolence, courage, fairness, generosity, honesty, loyalty, patience, tolerance
- A person of strong moral character
 - possesses many virtues
 - knows right thing to do in each situation

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For/Against Virtue

- Provides a motivation for good behavior
- Provides a solution to the problem of impartiality
 - Some virtues are partial (e.g., generosity)
 - Other virtues must be impartial (e.g., honesty)
- Virtue ethics may not work as a stand-alone theory

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Summary

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Insights Offered by Various Theories

- Ethical approach in general:
 - In interactions with other people we should respect them as rational beings
- Utilitarianism:
 - You should consider the consequences of an action before deciding whether it's right or wrong
 - Virtue ethics may be a good complement to utilitarianism - allows rationale for action to be considered
- Moral Rights, Justice and Common Good:
 - We should promote collective rights, such as the rights to life, liberty, and property
- Virtue:
 - Contemplation of what it means to be a person of good character

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Mixing Theories

- You *can* consider duties *and* rights *and* consequences when making moral decisions
- But what will you do when you can't respect rights absolutely and still maximize the total beneficial consequences?

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