CIS 381: Social & Ethical Issues of Computing

Ethical Frameworks

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Society, Ethics, and Morality

- Society
  - Association of people organized under a system of rules
  - People may belong to more than one society
- Morality
  - From Latin *moralis* (custom)
  - Actions are moral if they are “good” or worthy of praise
- Ethics
  - From Greek ἡθος (custom)
  - The formal study of moral standards and conduct
- Goal: construct a general basis for deciding what is moral
Ethical Frameworks

• Systems that guide ethical choices and provide a reason for that choice
• This is an unsolved problem!
• Many approaches that result in vastly different outcomes and behaviors
• Broad categories:
  - Relativism → non-workable
  - Duty-based (non-consequentialist) framework
  - Consequentialist framework
  - Virtue framework
Relativism

- Relativism
  - No universal standards of right and wrong
  - One person can say “X is right,” another can say “X is wrong,” and both can be correct

- Subjective relativism
  - Each person decides right and wrong for himself or herself
  - “What’s right for you may not be right for me”

- Cultural relativism
  - What is “right” and “wrong” depends upon a society’s actual moral guidelines
  - These guidelines vary from place to place and from time to time

[M. J. Quinn]
Case For Relativism

• Well-meaning and intelligent people disagree on moral issues
• Ethical debates can seem disagreeable and pointless
• Different social contexts demand different moral guidelines
Case Against Relativism

- Blurs line between doing what you think is right and doing what you want to do
- Makes no moral distinction between the actions of different people
- Because two societies do have different moral views doesn’t mean they ought to have different views (is-ought problem)
- It doesn’t account for the evolution of moral guidelines
- Existence of many acceptable practices does not imply all practices are acceptable (many/any fallacy)
Divine Command Theory

• Start with the assumption of a single God as creator of the universe and humans as part of creation (Judaism, Christianity, Islam)
• Morals based on the commands or character of God
• Good actions: those aligned with God’s will
• Bad actions: those contrary to God’s will
• Holy books reveal God’s will
• Use holy books as moral decision-making guides
• Sometimes augmented depending on level of fundamentalism
Case for Divine Command Theory

• Owe obedience to Creator
• God is all-good and all-knowing
• God is the ultimate authority
Case Against Divine Command Theory

- Different holy books disagree on certain teachings
- Society is multicultural, secular
- Some modern moral problems not directly addressed in scripture
- “The good” ≠ “God” (equivalence fallacy)
  - "Is an action good because God commanded it, or does God command it because it is good?"
- Based on obedience, not reason
Ethical Egoism

• Each person should focus exclusively on his or her self-interest
• Morally right action: that action that provides self with maximum long-term benefit
• Ayn Rand, author of The Fountainhead and Atlas Shrugged, espoused a theory akin to ethical egoism
Case for Ethical Egoism

- We are already inclined to do what’s best for ourselves
- It is better to let other people take care of themselves
- The community can benefit when individuals put their well-being first
- Other moral principles are rooted in the principle of self-interest
Case Against Ethical Egoism

• An easy moral philosophy may not be the best moral philosophy (short-term vs. long-term benefits)
• We know a lot about what is good for someone else
• Self-interest can lead to blatantly immoral behavior
• Other moral principles are superior to principle of self-interest
• People who take the good of others into account lead happier lives
• By definition, does not respect the ethical point of view (not community-focused)
Workable Frameworks

• Non-consequentialist (Kantianism): concerned with agent’s **intent** rather than consequence
• Consequentialist (Utilitarianism & Social Contract Theory): concerned with **consequence** of agent’s actions
• Agent-centered: concerned with ethical makeup of agent
Kantianism: Good Will

- Good will: desire to do the right thing
- Difference between what we want to do and what we ought to do
- Deontological: duty, not emotion or consequences
- Immanuel Kant: Only thing in the world that is good without qualification is a good will
- Reason should cultivate desire to do right thing
- Categorical Imperative: unconditional rule, regardless of circumstances
Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws.
A Quick Check

• When evaluating a proposed action, reverse roles
• What would you think if that person did the same thing to you?
• Negative reaction → evidence that your will to do that action violates the Categorical Imperative
• Example: "Steal when possible"
  - Stealing assumes existence of private property
  - If this is universal, no one has property
  - Leads to a logical contradiction (stealing can't exist)
Categorical Imperative (2nd Formulation)

Act so that you treat both yourself and other people as ends in themselves and never only as a means to an end.
Kant: Don't use others as a means to an end
Example

- You know a factory is going to be shut down in a year and production shifted elsewhere
- You need new hires to complete current work
- Many potential new employees would need to relocate
- Should you tell them about the factory closing in a year?
- If you don't, are you using them as a means to an end?
Plagiarism Scenario

• Carla is a single mother who works full time and takes two evening courses each semester
• A particular history class requires more work than normal, and Carla has earned an A so far
• Carla doesn't have time to write the final report and purchases it and submits it as her own
Kantian Evaluation (2nd Formulation)

• Carla submitted another person’s work as her own
• She attempted to deceive professor
• She treated professor as a means to an end
  - End: passing the course
  - Means: manipulate professor
• What Carla did was wrong
Kantian Evaluation (1st Formulation)

• Carla wants credit for plagiarized report
• Rule: "You may claim credit for work performed by someone else"
• If rule universalized, reports would no longer be credible indicator’s of student’s knowledge, and professors would not give credit for reports
• Proposal moral rule is self-defeating
• It is wrong for Carla to turn in a purchased report
Case for Kantianism

• Treats all persons as moral equals
• Gives all people moral worth as rational, autonomous beings
• Holds everyone to the same standard
• Produces universal moral guidelines
Perfect and Imperfect Duties

• **Perfect duty**: duty obliged to fulfill without exception
  - Example: Telling the truth

• **Imperfect duty**: duty obliged to fulfill in general but not in every instance
  - Example: Using your talents (e.g. musical ability)
Case Against Kantianism

- Sometimes no rule adequately characterizes an action
- Sometimes there is no way to resolve a conflict between rules
  - In a conflict between a perfect duty and an imperfect duty, perfect duty prevails
  - In a conflict between two perfect duties, no solution
- Kantianism allows no exceptions to perfect duties
Workable Frameworks

- Workable in the sense of using the framework for this class
  - Respect the ethical point of view
  - Make it possible to present a persuasive, logical argument to a diverse audience of skeptical, yet open-minded people

- Relativism: not workable, can't argue

- Divine Command Theory: not workable, diverse audience

- Ethical egoism: not workable, not workable, doesn't respect ethical point of view

- Kantianism: workable, has weaknesses but satisfies criteria