CIS 381: Social & Ethical Issues of Computing

Ethical Frameworks

Dr. David Koop
Ethical Frameworks

• Systems guide ethical choices and provide a reason for that choice
• This is an unsolved problem!
• Approaches result in vastly different outcomes and behaviors
• Broad categories:
  - Relativism
  - Duty-based (non-consequentialist) framework:
    • Divine Command Theory
    • Kantianism
  - Consequentialist framework
    • Utilitarianism
    • Social Contract Theory
  - Virtue framework
What is Utilitarianism?
Utilitarianism

[Diagram showing a balance scale with "GOOD" and "BAD" on either side. On the left side, there are three boxes labeled "Benefit" and on the right side, two boxes labeled "Harm".]

[M. J. Quinn]
What is the difference between act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism?
Act Utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism
  - Morality of an action has nothing to do with intent
  - Focuses on the consequences
  - A consequentialist theory

- Act utilitarianism
  - Add up change in happiness (+/−) of all affected beings
  - Sum > 0, action is good
  - Sum < 0, action is bad
  - Right action to take: one that maximizes the sum
Act Utilitarianism

• Case for:
  - Practical: we are familiar with cost-benefit analysis
  - Comprehensive: can take into account all factors

• Case against:
  - Unclear whom to include in calculations and how far out into the future to consider
  - We **cannot predict** consequences with certainty
  - Susceptible to the **problem of moral luck**
Rule Utilitarianism

• Apply the Principle of Utility to rules not individual actions
  - Act utilitarianism applies Principle of Utility to individual actions
  - Rule utilitarianism applies Principle of Utility to moral rules
• We ought to adopt moral rules which, if followed by everyone, will lead to the greatest increase in total happiness
• Case for:
  - Not every moral decision requires performing utilitarian calculus
  - Moral rules survive exceptional situations
• Case against utilitarianism in general:
  - All consequences must be measured on a single scale.
  - Utilitarianism ignores the problem of an unjust distribution of good consequences

[M. J. Quinn]
Assignments

• Assignment 1 grades and feedback should be out soon
• **Assignment 2** is due Friday
  - Patricia Churchland's views on how biology and neuroscience inform ethical study
  - Read either Churchland's paper or Shea's review
  - Skim the one you don't read
Social Contract Theory

“Morality consists in the set of rules, governing how people are to treat one another, that rational people will agree to accept, for their mutual benefit, on the condition that others follow those rules as well.”

– J. Rachels
Kinds of Rights

- Negative right: A right that another can guarantee by leaving you alone (free expression)
- Positive right: A right obligating others to do something on your behalf (free K-12 education)
- Absolute right: A right guaranteed without exception (right to life)
- Limited right: A right that may be restricted based on the circumstances (free education limited to K-12)

- Positive rights tend to be more limited
- Negative rights tends to be more absolute
John Rawls’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.

- 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).
Rawls’s First Principle of Justice

Just

Unjust

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Rawls’s Difference Principle: Progressive Tax

![Bar chart showing income taxes paid for different income levels under Plan A and Plan B.](chart.png)
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”
Evaluation (Social Contract Theory)

- 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.
Case for Social Contract Theory

• Framed in language of rights
• Explains why people act in self-interest in absence of common agreement
  - Tragedy of the commons: individuals benefit from exploiting a particular resources/rule while the community suffers the costs
• Provides clear analysis of certain citizen/government problems
  - Why the government can deprive criminals of certain rights: punishment for not following the rules
  - Why civil obedience can be morally right action: e.g., certain people bear greater burdens with fewer benefits
Case Against Social Contract Theory

• No one signed social contract
  - hypothetical and non-historical
  - facts and values + logical reasoning
• Some actions have multiple characterizations (like Kantianism)
• Conflicting rights problem (like Kantianism)
• Unjust to people incapable of upholding contract
  - Add clause to distinguish those who knowingly break rules?
  - What about drug addicts who steal?
Workable
Critique of Enlightenment Theories

- Kantianism, utilitarianism, social contract theory ignore important moral considerations
  - moral education
  - moral wisdom
  - family and social relationships
  - role of emotions

- Virtue ethics
  - arete, virtue, excellence: reaching highest potential
  - Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics (4th century BC)

- Ethical conduct means determining an agent’s traits and behaviors and building on those that foster good

- Considers entirety of an agent’s life rather than individual actions

[M. J. Quinn, S. Abraham]
Virtues and Vices

- Two types of virtue
  - intellectual virtues: virtues associated with reasoning and truth
  - moral virtues: virtues of character (e.g., honesty)

- Moral virtues
  - developed by habitually performing right action
  - deep-seated character traits
  - disposition to act in a certain way and feel in a certain way
Summary of Virtue Ethics

A right action is an action that a virtuous person, acting in character, would do in the same circumstances.

A virtuous person is a person who possesses and lives out the virtues.

The virtues are those character traits human beings needs in order to flourish and be truly happy.

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Vices

- Vices are opposite of virtues
- Vice: a character trait that prevents a human being from flourishing or being truly happy
- Often, a virtue situated between two vices
  - Courage between cowardliness and rashness
  - Generosity between stinginess and prodigality
Case for Virtue Ethics

• It often makes more sense to focus on virtues than obligations, rights, or consequences
• Personal relationships can be morally relevant to decision making
• Theory recognizes our moral decision-making skills develop over time
• With this theory there are no irresolvable moral dilemmas
• Emotions play an important role in living a moral life
Case Against Virtue Ethics

• Reasonable people may disagree on character traits needed for human flourishing
• Cannot use virtue ethics to guide government policy
• Virtue ethics undermines attempts to hold people responsible for their bad actions
Workable
Comparing Workable Ethical Theories
Ethical Objectivism vs. Relativism

- Ethical objectivism: Morality has an existence outside the human mind
- Relativism: Morality is a human invention
- Divine command theory, ethical egoism, Kantianism, utilitarianism, social contract theory, and virtue ethics examples of ethical objectivism
Workable Ethical Theories

- We seek theories with these characteristics:
  - Based on the ethical point of view
  - Objective moral principles developed using logical reasoning based on facts and commonly held values

- Workable ethical theories
  - Kantianism
  - Act and rule utilitarianism
  - Social contract theory
  - Virtue ethics
Comparing Workable Ethical Theories

What makes an action morally right?

- It results in the maximum net increase in the total good of the affected parties. (ACT UTILITARIANISM)
- It is in accord with a correct moral rule.
- It is consistent with the actions of a virtuous person. (VIRTUE THEORY)

What makes a moral rule correct?

- We can imagine everyone following this rule all the time without producing a logical contradiction that undermines the rule. (KANTIANISM)
- The effect of everyone following this rule all the time would be the greatest increase in the total good. (RULE UTILITARIANISM)
- Rational people would collectively accept it as binding because of the resulting benefits to the community. (SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY)
Insights Offered by Various Theories

• Kantianism: Every person is equally valuable, and when you interact with other people you should always respect them as rational beings. It is wrong to privilege your needs and desires over those of other people.

• Utilitarianism: You should consider the consequences of an action before deciding whether it’s right or wrong.

• Social contract theory: We should collectively promote human rights, such as the rights to life, liberty, and property.

• Virtue ethics: You can count on a good person to do the right thing at the right time in the right way.
It’s Up to You

• You can consider duties and rights and consequences and virtues when making moral decisions

• Ultimately, you have to decide:
  - What kind of person do I want to be?
  - What kind of world do I want to live in?