

# CS305 Topic – Introduction to Ethics



Sources: Baase: A Gift of Fire and Quinn:  
Ethics for the Information Age

# What is Ethics?

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A branch of philosophy that studies principles relating to “right” and “wrong”.

It seeks to address questions such as

- *“What do people think is right?”*
- *“What does ‘do the right thing’ mean?”*
- *“How should people act?”*
- *“What rules or laws should we have?”*

# What is Ethics (cont.)

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Goal: To help people to make moral decisions.

- It assumes that people are rational and free to choose how they will act.
- It can be used to describe how people do act *or* how people should act.

# But ...

## *Negative Arguments:*

There are no universal norms of right and wrong.

Ethical debates are disagreeable and pointless.

- We are all well-meaning and intelligent people
- Each person may decide right and wrong for himself or herself: *“What’s right for you may not be right for me”*
- We can disagree on moral issues

# Why Study Ethics?

## *Positive Arguments:*

- Not everyone can do what they want –  
Must respect other people and their values.
- “Common wisdom” not always adequate; need to be prepared to face future ethical decisions.
- Everybody shares the “core values” of life.

Ethics provides bases to make best rational decisions.

# Ethical Theories

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Many of them:

- Approximately 2,000 years of organized literature concerned with ethics
- Many famous philosophers contributed: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Kant, etc.

Kenneth Laudon [1995] categorized ethical theories with “*Three questions, six answers.*”

# Question One: What is “Goodness”?

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- *Answer 1 (Phenomenologist)* –
  - It is a higher order, and it is given.
  - One must understand the abstract concepts of right and wrong, and act accordingly.
- *Answer 2 (Positivist)* –
  - It is whatever we make of it.
  - We have to derive ethical principles for ourselves according to our observations of the real world.

# Question Two:

## What does Acting Ethically Mean?

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- Answer 1 (*Deontologist*) –
  - Acting ethically means respecting one's duties and obligations.
  - Each single act is itself good or bad, regardless of its consequences.
- Answer 2 (*Teleologist*) –
  - Acting ethically means acting in such a way that the outcome is good.
  - An act can be judged only by its consequences. No act is *a priori* good.

# Question Three:

## What is the Scope of Morality?

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- *Answer 1 (Collectivist)* – Ethical standards make sense only if they equally apply to everyone.
- *Answer 2 (Individualist)* – Nobody should be committed to accepting ethical standards; individuals should set their own rules through self-analysis and reflection.



# A Few Ethical Systems

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- Kantianism
- Utilitarianism
- Ethical Egoism
- Subjective Relativism
- Cultural Relativism
- Social Contract Theory
- Divine Command Theory

# Kantianism

Attributed to Immanuel Kant (1724-1804).

- Focus on the rightness of moral rules (“good will”); disregard emotional feelings and consequences.
- Founded on the view that all people are fundamentally rational beings, and can derive moral rules from the logic of the situation and act according to the rules.

*Kant’s Criteria:*

- Can the rule be universally applied to everyone?
- Does the rule treat people as ends, not means?

# Examples

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- Some Valid Rules:

*“Do not kill”, “Do not lie”, “Do not steal”,  
“Follow the laws”.*

- An Invalid Rule:

*“Get this work done, whatever it takes.”*

## Examples (cont.)

Question: Can a person in an extreme situation make a promise with the intention of breaking it later?

Proposed Rule:

*“I may make promises with the intention of later breaking them.”*

Analysis:

- Universalizing the Rule:  
*“Everyone may make and break promises.”*
- This rule would make promises unbelievable, contradicting desire to have promise believed.
- The rule is flawed. The answer is “No.”

# Critiques on Kantianism

## *Arguments For:*

- Rational
- Produces universal moral guidelines
- Treats all persons as moral equals

## *Arguments Against:*

- It allows no exceptions to moral rules
- Sometimes no rule adequately characterizes an action
- There is no way to resolve a conflict between rules

# Examples Revisit

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- Rule: *“Do not kill.”*

What if it's on a battlefield?

- Rule: *“Do not lie.”*

What if not lying will lead to bad consequences?

# Utilitarianism

A consequentialist theory.

Utilitarianism decides whether an act or rule is "right" depending on whether it results in the increase of the aggregate "happiness" (or "utilities").

- **Act utilitarianism** – Judging the benefits of an single act.
- **Rule utilitarianism** – Judging the benefits of all actions that follow the rule.

# Example

## *Problem:*

State wants to replace a curvy stretch of highway:

- 150 houses would have to be removed
- Some wildlife habitat would be destroyed

## *Analysis:*

- *Costs:* \$31 million (compensation for homeowners and wildlife habitat, plus construction cost)
- *Benefits:* \$39 million savings in driving costs

## *Conclusion:*

Benefits exceed costs. It's a good action.

## Example 2

August 2003, *Blaster* worm infected thousands of Windows computers. Soon after, someone wrote a “good” worm *Nachi*, which

- 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

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.”*

# Example 2 Evaluation

- 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. The action is wrong.

# Critiques on Utilitarianism

## *Arguments For:*

- Focuses on practical “goodness”
- Comprehensive; can include exceptional situations

## *Arguments Against:*

- Requires aggregating all consequences on a single scale
- Does not recognize or respect individual rights. (A minority group could be sacrificed for the greater happiness of the majority.)

# Subjective Relativism

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## The idea:

There are no universal moral norms.

Each person defines

right/wrong independently.

“If I think it is right, then that makes it right.”

# Subjective Relativism

## Arguments for:

- Gives everyone a right to define “goodness”.
- Eliminates all further moral debate.

## Arguments against:

- No distinction between doing what is “right” and doing whatever you want.
- We can never judge the acts of another person.
- Ethics is not based on *reason* or *principle*.

# 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.
- A particular action may be right in one society at one time and wrong in other society or at another time.

# Cultural Relativism

## **Arguments For:**

- Different social contexts demand different moral guidelines; it is arrogant for one society to judge another.

## **Arguments Against:**

- Doesn't explain how moral guidelines are determined.
- Provides no way out for cultures in conflict.
- Because many practices are acceptable does not mean any cultural practice is acceptable .
- Societies do, in fact, share certain core values.

# Ethical Egoism

## The Idea:

Each person acts out of self-interest.

Ayn Rand wrote

“Atlas Shrugged” & “The Fountainhead”

Focus on your long-term best interest.

What keeps society from falling into anarchy  
with everyone screwing everyone?

Personal character traits become important

*Reputation, trust, reliability, virtue, etc.*

# Ethical Egoism

## Arguments For:

Most people naturally act in their own self-interest.

Society as a whole benefits when each individual puts self-interest first.

Capitalism:

*The baker sells bread out of self-interest.*

Each individual knows what is in his best interest, so he/she should decide.

# Ethical Egoism

## Arguments Against:

- Many people do not act in their own long-term best interest.  
Examples...  
*Other ethical systems might save us from our ourselves.*
- Some people tend to gain power.  
They use their power to get more power.
- Some people are naturally “superior”.  
The weaker people resent the successes of the strong, superior winners.

# Social Contract Theory

Individuals implicitly accept a “*Social Contract*”, on the condition that others follow the rules as well.

- Individuals act within a sphere of freedom, as long as the set of rules are respected.
- The “social contract” rules are established simply to enable everyone the benefits of social living. They center on respecting natural rights to life, liberty, and property.
- Everyone benefits when everyone bears the burden of following certain rules.

# Kinds of Rights

According to John Locke (1632–1704), there are three natural rights: life, liberty, and property.

*Other Classifications:*

- *Negative Rights (Liberties)* –  
The right to act without interference.
- *Positive Rights (Claim-Rights)* –  
An obligation of some people to provide certain things for others.

# Example

Bill owns a chain of DVD rental stores. He collects information about rentals from customers and sells customer profiles to direct marketing firms. Are Bill's actions wrong?

## *Evaluation:*

- Bill's rights vs. customers' rights vs. marketing firms' rights
- Who owns information about transaction?

# Critiques on Social Contract Theory

## *Arguments For:*

- Framed in the language of rights.
- Without common agreement, rational people may act out in self-interest.
- Provides clear analysis of certain government actions.
  - E.g. “Those who do not follow the rules will be punished.”

## *Arguments Against:*

- Conflicting rights problem
- May be unjust to people who are incapable of following (not deliberately breaking) the rules

# Divine Command Theory

Based on the idea that good actions are those aligned with the will of God and bad actions are those contrary to the will of God.

- God's will has been revealed to us — We can use the holy books as moral decision-making guides.

Judaism: Torah

Christianity: Bible

Islam: Koran

# Divine Command Theory

## Arguments For:

- God is all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful  
We'd better do what he says!
- God's authority is higher than  
human-made ethical system

# Divine Command Theory

## Arguments Against:

- There are many different interpretations of God's word... who is right?
- We live in a multicultural, secular society.
- The holy books don't apply to modern technological issues.

Bible doesn't mention "Internet"

- Based on obedience, duty and not reason.

# Discussion Questions

- What are some examples of contemporary technology issues for which our society's moral guidelines seem to be nonexistent or unclear?
- (*Ethical vs Legal*) Can you give examples where an action may be legal but unethical, or vice versa?
- Do (or should) organizations have ethics? If so, who make them? And who are affected — employees? customers? the society?

# Discussion Questions

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- Which of the following rights should be considered legitimate positive rights by our society?
  - The right to a minimum standard of living
  - The right to housing
  - The right to health care
  - The right to education (K-12 or higher ed?)
  - The right to a paying job
  - The right to two months of vacation each year

# Discussion Questions

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- Examples of conflicts between positive rights of one person and negative rights of another person.