Basics of Ethics  
CS 215  
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1. Introduction

The goal of this course isn’t to be a general ethics course (if you want that you should take Philosophy 332) but it will be useful if you have a basic understanding of some of the major ethical theories. We want to be able to analyze situations, not just be emotional about them and it is ethical theories that let us do this.

Historically much of the work in ethics dates back to Socrates and then his student Plato. Plato believed that if people did some wrong it was because they made a mistake, not through bad intents since he believed that all people were driven by a desire to do good and to be happy. Plato’s mentor Socrates had a somewhat different view, and said (according to Plato) that people were virtuous if they always made decisions that they thought were good, whether or not the act that occurred turned out to be good.

2. Morality vs. Ethics

*Morals* are just rules that have been developed to, in some broad sense, improve life for those who live in the society. I’ll only be interested in societies of humans, but, for example, ants in an anthill society follow rules (morals) that are very different from those that would be acceptable to most human societies, and by rigidly following these rules ant societies are very successful, even though individuals in ant societies might have to be sacrificed. *Morality* is just a set of morals. So, for example, many Christians attempt to follow the Ten Commandments; for those who do so the morals are the individual commandments and the morality is the set of all ten of the commandments combined. Another equivalent way to look at this is that morals are what you use to decide whether any specific action is right or wrong.
How do we decide what are appropriate moralities, and whether a particular action should, or should not, be considered moral? E.g., is spamming just annoying, or should it also be considered immoral? Or if I get email from a fake bank page asking me to input private information, is this kind of phishing immoral, illegal, or again, just annoying. The study of morality is called ethics, which is a philosophical field where different ethical systems try to help us to determine whether or not a particular action is moral. Since ethics is a branch of philosophy, it is also called moral philosophy. There are a number of different ethical systems, some of which will be described briefly in the rest of these notes, and they will not always be consistent.

Ethics is traditionally divided into three sub-branches, metaethics, normative ethics, and applied ethics.

Metaethics studies whether there are underlying moralities which can be applied to any decisions, even if one’s personal opinion is different. For example someone might want to steal something or have extra-marital sex, but many moralities (but not all) would tell them that these are wrong.

Normative ethics looks for specific norms or standards of behaviors that say whether particular actions are right or wrong. Classic examples start with “Thou shalt not …”

Applied ethics is much less general. It looks at specific actions and analyzes whether they are moral or not, often comparing them under different ethical systems. E.g., one could look at spamming, and try to determine whether it is moral or immoral. For example under subjective relativism, where everyone decides for themselves what is right or wrong, the spammer presumably thinks that their actions are moral. However under Kantianism, which basically says “if everyone did this would the result be good or bad?” then spamming is clearly immoral because if everyone sent out millions of spam messages the system would collapse.

A typical ethical system is divine command theory, where a particular religion’s primary holy book or books is used to determine what is moral and what isn’t. For example, this approach has recently been used extensively by opponents of gay marriage in the US, who have quoted biblical comments\(^1\) that imply that marriage is a union between one man and one woman\(^2\). I’ll briefly describe some of the most important ethical systems below:

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\(^1\) Including Genesis 2:24

\(^2\) An interpretation that is challenged by gay rights supporters.
3. Some Ethical Theories

a. Subjective relativism: This says that everyone decides their own morality, and does what they believe is best. The arguments for and against subjective relativism tend to be based on the concepts of tolerating the views of others vs. the view that some other opinions are inherently wrong, and that people who hold them should be persuaded that their views are wrong, even if they are strongly held. Issues like gay marriage, the war in Iraq, Terri Schiavo, abortion, and so on, tend to lead to strongly held views on both sides, where each side is intolerant and believes that the other side is immoral.

b. Cultural relativism: Here the society determines moral values. This allows for the fact that different societies can have completely different moralities, but expects that within a society people will follow the rules. E.g., the US is unique among Western nations in the use of the death penalty. Proponents of cultural relativism say that other societies should accept this. Opponents could say that even if the practice is acceptable in the US they think that it is barbaric, and so it should be opposed.

c. Divine command theory: This approach believes in a holy book, written or inspired by a divine hand. This can include the Book of Mormon, the Bible, the Quran, the 613 mitzvot (commandments) of the Torah, and many other holy texts and their related religions. Advantages of divine command theory are that some moral issues are clear-cut, and so if your holy book says that “thou shalt not commit adultery” then clearly it is immoral under divine command theory to commit adultery. One problem, of course, is that different religions can lead to very different moralities, and since some rules are absolute there is no way to resolve these differences, which can, in extreme cases, lead to holy wars or ethnic cleansing. Another problem is that most things aren’t stated as explicitly as the rule against adultery in the seventh commandment in the King James Bible, and so interpretations have to be made and even within a religion different interpretations can lead to different beliefs. Some Christians say that wars can be justified by the bible, while others put “WHO WOULD JESUS BOMB?” bumper stickers on their cars or say that the sixth commandment (“thou shalt not kill” in King James) is absolute. Another problem is that divine command theory leaves atheists out in the cold.

d. The golden rule: This rule, “do unto others as we would have others do unto us,” works really well in kindergarten and in person to person relationships, but can work less well when looking at group dynamics and in situations where you and the others are very different. The rule is also called the positive golden rule, as compared to the negative golden rule which says “don’t do unto others as we would have others not do unto us.” The positive rule basically says do things to other people that you’d like them to do to you, while the negative rule says don’t do things to others unless you’d be happy if they did them to you. One weakness in the rule, as mentioned above, is that it doesn’t work well if you and the others are different. E.g. I don’t care whether or not my cat Luther kicks me, so does that mean I can kick
Luther? Or if a Vietnam vet suffering from the effects of Agent Orange wants help, does the rule give me any guidance on whether or not I should help him? Another problem with the rule is that it is very subjective. I.e., it depends on what I want, not necessarily what the other person wants. E.g. if I am masochistic it tells me to hurt anyone else, and if I am suicidal it tells me to kill anyone else.

e. Kantianism: Immanuel Kant created a “categorical imperative” in the 18th century to be used to determine whether a particular act is moral or not. The imperative (the first formulation) is “Act so that the maxim [determining motive of the will] may be capable of becoming a universal law for all rational beings.”3 This sounds complex, but what it means is that if you are wondering whether an act is moral or not then you say “what would happen if everyone did the same thing?” If the result would be good then the individual act is moral, but if it is bad then the individual act is immoral. Under Kantianism spamming is immoral, because if every Internet user spammed as many email accounts as they could then email would become useless, and so at best it would be self-defeating. Other issues like, say, adultery, take more consideration that they do under the biblical divine command theory. In the current US society, if everyone committed adultery then the economic issues related to raising children could be chaotic. Most societies have created systems where both the father and mother of a child are known, either by insisting on one man/one woman relationships or by one man/one or more women relationships, which handles issues like the cost (both financial and in time spent) when raising a child, inheritance, etc. Other societies, where child rearing is a communal responsibility, have often not had moral restrictions against adultery. So Kantianism could be used to say that adultery is immoral in some societies and moral in others, based on how those societies handle child rearing and inheritance.

Kantianism tends to be rigid in its use of logic to create moral laws. A Kantian would miss the point of Hugo's Les Miserables, where Jean Valjean is sent to prison for stealing a loaf of bread to feed his children. I.e., it can be very useful to analyze the morality of general situations, but it is weak in terms of handling special cases.

f. Utilitarianism or Act Utilitarianism: This was created in the early 19th century by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill as an alternative to Kantianism. It is based on the Principle of Utility which was first defined by Bentham, whose goal was to change the English laws from being based on the preservation of the status quo to legislating against immoral acts, who said that it was a "sacred truth" that "the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation." Later John Stuart Mill, whose goals were more philosophical, states in his work Utilitarianism4, “The creed which accepts as the foundation of morals, Utility, or the Greatest Happiness Principle, holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”5

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3 There are many translations of Kant's Categorical Imperative available. I'm using the version in the Catholic Encyclopedia (http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03432a.htm).
4 http://www.utilitarianism.com/mill1.htm
Happiness can be defined very broadly to include anything which improves the quality of life. The important feature is that an act is moral if the total effect on the whole population of the society is to increase happiness, even if some members are less happy as a result. I’ll take a very artificial example to try to clarify things. Say that we have a society of four individuals, and their happiness is based on the sum of a rating of their wealth and a rating of their health. Let’s assume that the current values are as shown in the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Wealth</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Happiness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

so the total happiness of the society is 54. Now assume that there is a cure that will improve D’s health from 2 to 10, but to fund the treatment we must tax everyone 10% of their wealth. If we do this the table becomes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>Wealth</th>
<th>Health</th>
<th>Happiness</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>4.5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The total happiness has gone from 54 to 59, and so it is moral to tax everyone to improve D’s health, even though A, B, and C are less happy than they used to be.

Utilitarianism defined in this way, where it is used to determine whether or not an action is moral, later came to be called *act utilitarianism* when a modified form called *rule utilitarianism* was developed.

A criticism of act utilitarianism is that it is often willing to oppress a minority in order to improve the life of the majority. Recently the US Congress has debated a proposal to cut off Amtrak funding in rural states, in order to be able to maintain quality in the states where 80% of the Amtrak passengers ride the trains. This is based on an overall cost/benefit analysis which lies at the heart of utilitarianism, and ignores the wishes of the minority who use Amtrak in rural states.

Utilitarianism is based on calculations, without any underlying moral principles. For example, if I am working at a funeral home and someone wants to bury their wife wearing her wedding ring, then if I steal the ring right before I nail up the casket then nobody will know and since I’ll be happier that means that overall happiness has increased, and so utilitarianism tells me that I should go ahead.
Similar to utilitarianism are ethical altruism and ethical egoism. All three are classified as consequentialist ethical systems. With ethical altruism one acts for the greatest benefit of others; with ethical egoism one does what is best for oneself. With ethical altruism one has an obligation to help others whenever possible, but no such obligation exists with ethical egoism. However helping others isn’t blocked by ethical egoism – maybe it makes some people feel better to, for example, spend time working with skiers with disabilities or to give to an MSU scholarship account, in which case ethical egoism could say that it is in their best interest to do so.

**g. Social contract theory:** Social contract theory assumes that a society has a set of rules that they expect all of their members to follow. This can include explicit laws and more implicit conventions. If someone doesn’t want to follow the rules then they can leave the society. The social contract theory was developed by Hobbes in the 17th century, who believed that the natural state of man was to be at war, and so one needed a powerful state, which he called the Leviathan, to control them and provide peace. It was important to him that the people had to agree to obey certain rules (morals), and that they must also accept a system of laws to punish those who didn’t obey the rules. Basically people had agreed to live in a civilized society, and part of this agreement was that they would agree to the morals of the society and accept that these morals must be enforced. In return they would be protected from having to spend all of their life protecting themselves. Hobbes believed in the divine right of the monarchy as the center of the Leviathan, but later developers of social contract theory, including Rousseau and Locke, did not.

By itself, social contract theory lacks definition in terms of how a community will agree to the rules and punishments that will be used to maintain stability. Rawls’ Theory of Justice said that social contracts must be based on two principles. The first is that “Every person may claim a fully adequate number of basic rights and liberties, such as freedom of thought and speech, freedom of association, the right to be safe from harm, and the right to own property, so long as these claims are consistent with everyone else having a claim to the same rights and liberties.” The second addresses fairness and says “Any social and economic inequalities must satisfy two conditions: first, they are associated with positions in society that everyone has a fair and equal opportunity to assume; and second, they are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society.” Essentially this gives three principles that must be followed under social contract theory:

a. Everyone, regardless of standing or economic status, has the same basic rights.

b. It is recognized that some will have higher status and wealth, but everyone should have the same opportunity to achieve that status and wealth.

c. Efforts should be made to reduce social and economic inequalities by providing more to those who have less or taking more from those who have more. (This is the difference principle.)
An example of how beliefs vary in different countries with respect to Rawls’ theory of justice can be seen by looking at inheritance taxes. In Britain estates over a certain level\(^6\) are taxed at 40%, in an attempt to redistribute wealth after the generator of that wealth dies, in the belief that the children of rich people should not have an excessive advantage in life over the children of poor people, but that both should be advanced based on their merits and desires. In the US legislation passed in 2001 has effectively removed most estate taxes, through 2010.\(^7\)

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\(^6\) This level is supposedly set to about the price of an average house so that people can pass down their house for their children to live in, but the value has not kept up with rapid increases in the price of housing.

With the possibility of an early election looming, on August 17 2007 some members of the Conservative Party proposed eliminating this tax, which generates about £3.6 billion ($7.2 billion) each year.

\(^7\) The US tax exemption (after deductions) is currently (2007) set at $2 million, which increases to $3.5 million in 2009. In 2010 the estate tax is repealed. However in 2011 the law that controls all this hits its sunset limit and the tax comes back with a $1 million exemption unless the bill is renewed. State “death taxes” vary considerably. Montana, for example, has repealed all estate taxes.