POLITECNICO DI MILANO

Computer Ethics

Normative Ethics – Ethical Theories

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Ethics and morality

- Ethics is the **systematic reflection** on what is moral

- **Morality** is the whole of opinions, decisions, and actions with which people, individually or collectively, express what they think is **good** or **right**

- **Systematic reflection** on morality increases our **ability** to cope with **moral problems** (also those related to technology)

- **Ethics** is **not a manual** with answers: it reflects on questions and arguments concerning the moral choices people can make

- Ethics is a **process for searching** for the right kind of morality

Descriptive and normative ethics

- **Descriptive ethics** is the branch of ethics **describing existing morality**, including customs and habits, opinions about good and evil, responsible and irresponsible behavior, and acceptable and unacceptable action

- **Normative ethics** is the branch of ethics **judging morality** and trying to formulate **normative recommendations** about how to act or live

  - Do the norms and values actually used conform to our ideas about how people should behave?

Judgments

- **Descriptive judgment** describes what is actually the case (the present), what was the case (the past), or what will be the case (the future)

  - They are true or false ("*The Challenger met all safety standards of the time*")

  - Role of **science** in determining the truth of descriptive judgments

- **Normative judgment** is about whether something is good or bad, desirable or undesirable, right or wrong

  - How the world should be instead of how it is

  - "*The Challenger should never have been launched*"

- To distinguish is **not** always **easy**

Values

- Values are lasting convictions or matters that people feel should be strived for **in general** and not just for themselves to be able to lead a **good life** or to realize a **fair society**

  - "*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*": slogan not expressing a personal preference, but values felt to be of importance for everyone

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Values: intrinsic and instrumental

- **Intrinsic** value: vale in and of itself

  - The value of money for Scrooge McDuck: he values money independently of what you he can do with money

- **Instrumental** value: something that is valuable in as far as it is a means to, or contributes to something else that is intrinsically good or value

  - The value of money for Mother Theresa: money as instrumental value to realize a higher end (helping the poors)

Privacy: intrinsic or instrumental value?

- Much debated in the literature of computer ethics

- Most common justification: privacy has instrumental value by offering us protection against harm

- (Johnson 2009): privacy should be regarded as an essential aspect of **autonomy**; autonomy is fundamental to what it means to be human, to our values as human beings

  - Privacy is a **necessary condition** for an **intrinsic value**: autonomy

  - The loss of privacy would be a threat to our most fundamental values

  - If a person is being watched by constant surveillance, this has an enormous effect on how the person behaves and how he or she sees himself or herself

Norms

- Norms are **rules** that prescribe what **actions** are required, permitted, or forbidden

- Values are often translated into norms; **norms** are **means** to realize **values**

  - Example: value of safety in a traffic system is mainly specified by the legal norms from the traffic regulations

Virtues

- Certain type of human characteristics or qualities

- **Moral virtues** (justice, honesty, courage, loyalty, creativity, …) are desirable characteristics of people – those that make people good

- **Intellectual virtues** focus on knowledge and skills

- Many moral virtues are also values (integrity)

  - But the notion of virtue mainly refers to the character development someone has to have gone through to truly realize those values

- **Moral virtues** are **indispensable** in a **responsible organization**

  - An organization can formulate nice values (integrity, respect) as much as it likes, but without the moral virtues being present in the character of its employees little will be accomplished

Theories in normative ethics

Relativism

- **Normative relativism** argues that all moral points of view – all values, norms, and virtues – are equally valid

- What's the problem?

  - It seems to involve an inherent **contradiction** (there are no universal norms, but at the same time it uses a universal norm)

  - It makes any meaningful **moral discussion** totally **impossible**

Universalism and absolutism

- **Universalism** states that there is a system of norms and values that is **universally applicable** to everyone, independent of time, place, or culture

- **Absolutism** is a rigid form of universalism in which no exceptions to rules are possible

- What's the problem?

    - Difficult to work with a universal norm valid for all situations

    - **No answer for conflicting norms**

   - No room for **independent moral judgment**

Utilitarianism

- Type of **consequentialism** (consequences of action are central to the moral judgment of those actions) based on utility principle

- Actions are judged by the amount of **pleasure** and **pain** they bring about

- The actions that bring the **greatest happiness** for the **greatest number** should be chosen (**maximization**)

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Historical roots: Bentham

- Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

  - **Hedonism** as the idea that 'pleasure' is the only thing that is good in itself and to which all other things are instrumental

  - **Utility principle** for which one should choose those actions that result in the **greatest happiness** for the **greatest number**

  - **Moral balance sheet** in which the **costs** and **benefits** for each possible action are weighted against each other

Historical roots: Stuart Mill
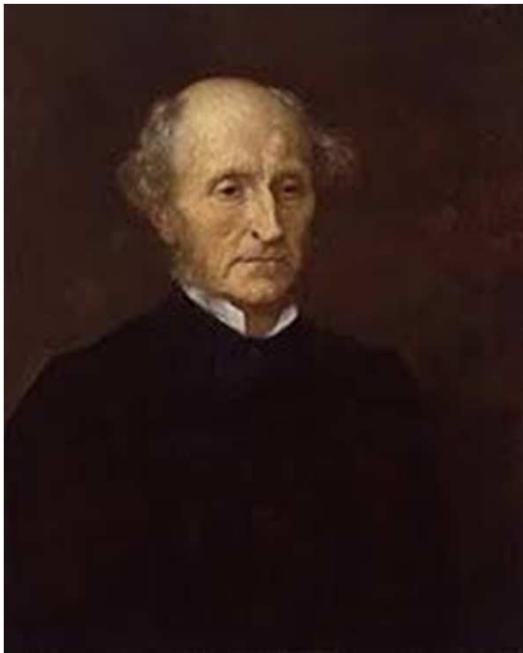
- John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

  - **Freedom principle** (no harm principle) as the moral principle that everyone is free to strive for his/her pleasure, as long as they do not deny the pleasure of others

Criticism of utilitarianism

- Happiness cannot be **measured objectively**

- Utilitarianism can lead to **exploitation**

- Consequences cannot be foreseen objectively and often are **unpredictable**

- Utilitarianism can lead to an **unjust division** of **costs** and **benefits** (against distributive justice)

- Utilitarianism **ignores** the **personal relationships** between people (only the total happiness counts)

- Certain actions are **morally acceptable** even if they do not create pleasure and some actions that **maximize pleasure** are **morally unacceptable**

Duty ethics

- Also known as **deontological ethics**

- The class of approaches in ethics in which an **action** is considered **morally right** if it is in **agreement** with a certain **moral rule**

- These rules

  - Can be given by **God** (such as in the Bible or the Koran)

  - Make appeal to a **social contract** that the involved parties have implicitly agreed to (e.g., a company code)

  - Are based on **reasonable arguments**

Kantian theory

- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) rejects the idea that moral laws are based on happiness and proposes **duty**

- **Categorical imperative** is a universal principle of the form "Do A" which is the **foundation** of all the moral judgments in Kant's view

Kant's moral principles

- **Universality principle** is the first formulation of the categorical imperative

  "*Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law*"

- **Reciprocity principle** is the second formulation of the categorical imperative

  "*Act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end, never as a means only*"

Equality and reciprocity

- **Free will** of all rational beings is the fundamental ground of human rights

  - **Equality postulate** as the prescription to treat persons as equals (with equal concern and respect)

- By stressing the **rational nature** of **humans** as free, intelligent, self-directing beings, **Kant** stresses that we must not merely use them as means to our selfish ends

  - To use people is to **disrespect their humanity**

- Ex.: to borrow money from someone by knowing that I will not be able to pay it back but while promising that I will do

Criticism of Kantian theory

- If all moral laws can be derived from the categorical imperative, the question arises whether all these laws form an **unambiguous** and **consistent system** of norms

    - To save one friend by lying

- A rigid adherence to moral rules can make people blind to the potentially **very negative consequences** of their actions

    - A case of child labor (more harm than good)

References

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- Van de Poel, I. and Royakkers, L. (2011). *Ethics, Technology, and Engineering*, Wiley-Blackwell