Ethical Systems

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CS 225
Communities

• We live in communities
• Members of communities cooperate to benefit the community as a whole
  ♦ Grocery stores and restaurants mean we don’t have to worry about our next meal
• Communities prohibit certain actions and make certain actions obligatory
• Communities can choose to punish members who don’t follow the rules
We need codes of conduct for what actions will be allowed and what will be prohibited. We call these codes of conduct “Morality.”
Ethics

• Study of Morality
• Study of what it means to “do the right thing”
Why Study Ethics?

- Society is changing rapidly
  - Digital technology
  - The Internet
  - Cloning
  - Genetic Engineering

- How do we know what is “right” and “wrong” in our new society?
  - What is a positive contribution?
  - What is taking unfair advantage?
From where does or concept of “right and wrong” come from?

- God?
- Evolution
  - of the human brain?
  - of human society?
- Logical process based on rational thought?
Ethical Theories

- **Relativism**
  - Subjective: Each person decides what’s right for them
  - Cultural: Each society/culture decides what’s right for them
- **Divine Command**
  - Do what “God” tells us is right
- **Kantianism**
  - Use reason to derive universal moral rules
- **Act and Rule Utilitarianism**
  - What’s right is what creates the greatest good
- **Social Contract**
  - We accept rules for our mutual benefit
Cultural Relativism

- No universal moral norms
- Each society decides what is right or wrong for them
  - Different social contexts
    - E.g. our relation to the environment
  - Arrogant for one society to judge another
  - Moral rules should reflect behavior
    - Music file sharing
Problems with Cultural Relativism

• Just because people have different views about right and wrong does not mean they should
  ◦ E.g. use torture
• Cultural relativism doesn’t explain evolution of moral behavior
  ◦ E.g. race and sex discrimination
• How are cultural conflicts resolved
  ◦ Cannibals?
• Not based on reason
  ◦ You can’t reason about what’s right and wrong
  ◦ No basis for negotiation of societal conflict
Rejected

For this course: we reject Divine Command and Subjective and Cultural Relativism as bases for morality

No basis for reasoning, discussing, persuading, arguing about moral choices
Kant

- Emmanuel Kant, German Philosopher
- Humans are rational
  - Ethical behavior can be determined from rational arguments
- Categorical Imperative:
  - First Formulation: Act only from moral rules that can be applied universally.
  - Second Formulation: Act so that people, yourself and others, are ends in themselves and never a means to an end.
- Always treat others as rational beings
Why Kantianism?

• Based on rationality
• Universal moral guidelines
• All people treated as moral equals
Problems with Kant

• How do I resolve conflicts between rules?
  ◦ Can I steal food to care for my children?
    ▪ Stealing is wrong
    ▪ Caring for children is right

• What about exceptions?
  ◦ Lying is wrong
  ◦ Can I tell my wife I like her new haircut when I don’t?
Utilitarianism

- John Stuart Mill
- The concept of “utility”
  - Good actions produce “happiness”
  - Bad actions product “unhappiness”
- Utilitarian principle: Act in ways that produce the greatest total “good”
  - Focus is on consequences
“Goods”
things that produce happiness

• Intrinsic goods
  ◦ Knowledge
  ◦ Nature
  ◦ Art
  ◦ Beauty

• Material goods
  ◦ Refrigerator, bed, heating systems

• Instrumental goods
  ◦ Money
Two types of utilitarianism

- Act utilitarianism
  - Individual actions should promote the greatest utility
  - Underlying assumption: this will produce the most good for everyone over time
- Rule utilitarianism
  - Adopt general rules which promote general happiness
    - Example: Tell the truth
  - May cause you negative utility in a particular case but will promote the greatest happiness for everyone over time
Examples of rules

• Don’t lie
• No one should drive over 70 m.p.h. on I-5
• Class examples
What are problems with utilitarianism?

- How do we measure and compare “good”?
  - How many dollars is a life worth?
  - Who and what count in our computations?
- Unjust distribution of “goods”
  - Do we sacrifice a small number of people for the benefit of the many?
  - Should Bill Gates be allowed to be that rich?
- No moral absolutes, no lines in the sand which cannot be crossed
  - The “slippery slope”
Contemporary example

- Use of torture against terrorist suspects
- Con:
  - Torture hurts the individual in question
    - And do they have the information you want?
  - Torture dehumanizes the torturer
- Pro: Preventing the next 9/11 would save thousands of lives
- Con (Utilitarian): Information obtained via torture is unreliable
- Con (Kantian): If we torture other people, then other countries will feel free to torture our people
“Social Contract”

• We all accept a set of rules or rights governing how we treat one another
  ✷ Based on mutual benefit
  ✷ On condition that others also follow those rules
• Example: When a stranger asks for directions, I provide them as best as I can
• We agree that society can enforce these rules
  ✷ Governments are established
  ✷ People who commit crimes can be put in jail
Social Contract

• Rights and duties
  - Negative right: Right to free expression
    - Duty: Don’t interfere with others free expression
  - Positive right: Free education
    - Duty: Allocate the necessary resources

• Focus on rules
  - Kantianism: Universal rules
  - Rule utilitarianism: Rules that generate the greatest good
  - Social Contract: Collective acceptance of a rule because it benefits the community
Why Social Contract?

- It is framed in terms of rights and duties
- It explains why it is rational to act for the “common good”, even in the absence of laws and enforcement
- It provides an ethical analysis of the relationship between individuals and the government
  - It is “right” to put a criminal in jail, even though we have restricted their individual liberty
Problems with Social Contract

- Cultural relativism in disguise?
  - No. Rather, an explanation of the process used to adopt moral guidelines.
- Multiple characterizations of an action.
- How do we solve difficult moral problems?
  - E.g. abortion
- How do we deal with people who can’t, for some reason, uphold the contract
  - Don’t have the necessary knowledge or mental capacity?
  - A drug addict who steals to feed their addiction?
Comparison

- What is the motivation for a particular action?
- What criteria is used to decide “right from wrong”?
- Individual or group focus?

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Case Study

• Professor does a study on high school students sexual behavior
• Hires a grad student to do analysis on the data
• Why should he safeguard the privacy of the students who participated in the study?
Utilitarian argument

• What if students discover their privacy violated
• Knowledge is a good
• Future studies may not have participants so future knowledge that could be good for everyone will be in jeopardy
Kantian argument

- You recognize and respect the promise given to the students to maintain privacy
- Students are persons they are entitled to the maintenance of that promise
- You would expect the same treatment if you were in the study yourself
• Can students reasonably expect that their privacy will be maintained?
• Certainly if they (or their parents) are told it will be
• What if no statement regarding privacy is made?
• What standards have other similar studies observed?
• What is someone admits to rape?
Grocery store grazing

• Give a utilitarian argument against this behavior?

• Give a “Kantian” argument against the same behavior?

• What about a social contract argument?