

CMSC 304 Computer Ethics

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Today's lecture

- A short summary of leading ethical frameworks
 - How do we reason about ethical questions?
- Next time: start ethical analyses

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Some Questions

- What do we mean by...
 - Moral obligation?
 - Moral responsibility?
 - Morally praiseworthy?
 - Morally blameworthy?
- What are 'rights'?
- Morality vs. ethics:
 - When is something immoral?
 - When is something amoral?
 - Is there such a thing as absolute morality?
 - Relativism vs. absolutism

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The Ford Pinto

Adapted from slides © Edward J Birrane III, with thanks

- Ford needed a cheap car to compete with Japanese cars
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• Generally speaking, we don't feel this is okay.
• How do we formalize that and turn it into consistent, well-articulated reasoning?

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What is Ethics?

- A branch of philosophy (aka "moral philosophy")
- The study of right and wrong action
- Descriptive (or comparative) ethics:
 - How do people think about these issues? What are the laws? What are the cultural norms?
- Prescriptive ethics:
 - How should one act? What should the laws and norms be? What is right and wrong?
- Partiality, impartiality, and moral partiality

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Ethical Theories are..

- Coherent: the pieces form a unified whole
- Consistent: different elements don't contradict
- Comprehensive: applicable to a range of questions
- Systematic: generalizable rules
- Impartial: applied without prejudice
 - Actually, not everyone agrees on this!
 - Do you have the same moral responsibilities to your classmate and your mother?

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Branches of Ethics

- Applied ethics
 - Identifying the correct course of action for real problems.
 - The focus of this class!
- Normative ethics (or just "ethics")
 - What should people do? What should they think?
- Meta-ethics
 - How do we set about answering these questions?
 - What is the "good?" How are moral propositions defended?
- For philosophers, not descriptive ethics
 - That is sociology.

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Absolute vs. relative morality

- Are moral guidelines **discovered** or **invented**?
- Absolutism: moral values are **unchanging universal laws**. They exist, they can be known, or at the very least that there are some types of human behavior which are, in themselves or by their very nature, always right or wrong.
 1. How do we discover these laws with guaranteed success?
 2. How do we reconcile cultural and historical differences?
 3. How can we usefully talk about ethics if we don't agree on the absolutes?
- Very generally, less professionally useful than...

<https://openforstudy/courses.com/blog/morality-absolute-relative>

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Relative morality

- Moral judgments are true or false only relative to some particular standpoint (for instance, that of a culture or a historical period); no standpoint is uniquely privileged over all others
- There is no **objective** moral order that makes our actions right or wrong
 1. Any discussion requires us to agree what (some of) the moral rules are from our particular standpoint
 2. Different standpoints may not be able to converse usefully
 3. If not handled carefully, anything can be justified
- This is why we spend effort to formalize our premises.

<https://sea.utm.edu/moral-re>

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Normative Ethics ("Ethics")

- So how do we make decisions about ethical questions?
- Consequentialism/utilitarianism (consequence based)
- Deontology (duty based)
- Contractualism (contract based)
- Natural rights (rights based)
- Virtue (character based)

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Consequentialism

- Maximize the overall good:
 - 'The greatest good for the greatest number'
- Impartiality and agent-neutrality:
 - Everyone's happiness counts the same.
 - My good counts for no more than anyone else's good.
 - My analysis of good is not me-specific.
- What's "the good?" Pleasure? Beauty? Money?
- Where does this go right? Wrong?

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Utilitarianism

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- Consequentialism is a family of theories
 - Only the **consequence** of an action is morally relevant
- Utilitarianism
 - Something is right if it is useful, that is, if it has utility
 - Useful for what? Something with intrinsic value
 - Hedonism was Bentham's value system
 - Pleasure is the only thing that is good; therefore, pain is that which is bad
 - Everything else is instrumental
- Utility principle
 - Greatest happiness to greatest people wins



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Utilitarianism/Consequentialism

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- The moral balance sheet
 - Something is right if it causes pleasure, wrong if it causes pain
- Any problems with this?
 - Pleasure is subjective – not everyone likes the same thing
 - Hard to compare pleasures
 - Eating ice cream == reading a good book?
 - Exploitation and abuse of minority positions
- Pleasure/pain (hedonism) is only one possible utility function for utilitarianism. What are some others?

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Utilitarianism/Consequentialism

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- John Stuart Mill to the rescue
 - Some happinesses are better than others
 - Better to be a sad human than a happy pig
 - Doesn't thoroughly define "better"
- Freedom principle: "One is free to do what one wishes, but only to the extent that no harm is done to others."
 - Pursuit of happiness, so long as you don't deny others
 - "Your right to swing your fist ends at my face"



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Utilitarianism/Consequentialism

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Seems great but... lots of criticism

1. Can't measure happiness objectively.
2. Can lead to exploitation (sacrifice the few for the many)
3. You can't always foresee consequences in advance.
4. Unjust division of costs and benefits.
5. Ignores personal relationships with people.
 - What about making the other person as happy as possible?
6. Some actions can be good without causing pleasure
 - Long term versus short term
7. Leads to ends-justifying-means arguments



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Deontology

- The **right** is more important than the **good**
 - It's about what you do, not what happens
- It is moral to follow rules, and intent is what matters
- Where do rules come from?
 - Religious guidelines
 - A list of duties and obligations
 - The rights of others
 - The social contract of rational agents
- Where does this go wrong?

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Immanuel Kant

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- Duty Ethics (Deontology)
 - Concern about actions, regardless of consequences of those actions
 - Actions are morally correct if they are in agreement with a moral rule
 - Laws, Norms, Principles
- Enter Kant
 - Can't base normative ethics on happiness – it's too subjective
 - Your **duty** is a better guide to ethics
 - Big emphasis on autonomy and moral duty
 - **Autonomy**: Humans, not deities, determine what is correct
 - **Good Will**: The only thing that is unconditionally good
 - The only thing with intrinsic value
 - Good will is more than good intention

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Rights-based

- Goodness: rights-sustaining vs. rights-violating
- Negative Rights: cannot ethically be taken away
 - Voting: I can't stop you from going to the polls.
 - (But note, I don't have to drive you.)
- Positive Rights: ethically must be provided
 - Positive rights are extremely rare
 - Must be provided by who, exactly?
- Natural Rights: possessed by virtue of being human
- Legal Rights: possessed because we all agree on it

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Rights-based

- Education *...in the US*
- Food
- Emergency health care
- Health care
- Ownership
- Privacy
- Employment

	Negative	Positive
Natural		
Legal		

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Virtue-based

- "What should I do?"
- **"What kind of person should I be?"**
 - Implied: what would that person do?
- Virtue Ethics
 - Focus on the nature of the acting person, not solely based on reason
 - Develop into morally good and responsible people by focusing on intellectual and personal virtues
- It is ethical to be a person of good character
- Pros: outside of philosophy classes, we live our choices.
 - Make ethical behavior and thought a habit
 - Corresponds better to moral intuition

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Actors, not Actions or Consequences

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- The Good Life
 - The highest good - different from pleasure (classical utilitarianists)
 - Realizing your uniquely human potential
- Who decides what this is? Aristotle!
 - Doctor from a family of doctors, student of Plato student of Socrates
 - Tutor for Alexander the Great, had own school in the Lyceum
 - First systematic approach to morality (Ethics) in Western Philosophy
 - Largely ignored by Christian Europe until Thomas Aquinas reconciled Aristotle's work with Christian doctrine.
 - Dominant philosophy until Immanuel Kant

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Virtue Ethics

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- The Nicomachean Ethics
 - Why is it called the Nicomachean Ethics?
 - A book written by Aristotle named for Nicomachus (Νικόμαχος), the name of Aristotle's father and his son
- Practical Wisdom
 - Choosing the right mean between two vices
 - The two vices are always "too little" and "too much"
- Criticisms of Virtue Ethics
 - Not all obligations to act can be reduced to virtues
 - Not all virtues turn into obligations to act
 - Not advisory in any appreciable way
 - People can use practical wisdom in awful ways



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Summary: no perfect answers

- Rights can play into all frameworks.

	Pros	(Some) Cons
Consequence-Based	Promotes happiness and utility	Justice for minority populations
Deontological/Duty-Based	Promotes duty and respect for individuals	Underestimates happiness, social utility
Contract-Based	Motivates morality	Itself only minimally moral
Character/Virtue-Based	Stresses moral development	Requires homogenous standards

Tavani, *Ethical Concepts and Ethical Theories*, Table 2.3

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Other topics

- Moral intuition: an *unreasoned* reaction (not *unreasonable*)
 - Our "intuitive awareness of value"
 - Intrinsically motivating
 - Retractable; fallible; unavoidable
- Consequence vs. intent
 - What should you have foreseen?
- Temptation
 - When are you responsible for the actions of others? (not never)
- Moral discourse stoppers

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Stopper #1

'People disagree on solutions to moral issues.'

Stopper #2

Who am I to judge others?

Stopper #3

Ethics is simply a private matter.

Stopper #4

Morality is simply a matter for individual cultures to decide.

Tavani, *Ethical Concepts and Ethical Theories*, Table 2-3

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Criticisms

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- Too much focus on justice and not other values, such as caring
 - Is it possible to answer this problem with no consideration of rules and laws?
- Might not be culturally neutral
 - Different cultural norms may change order, or how people progress
- Lots of moral reasoning from people is not perfect
 - Process of reasoning is as important as the end result
 - These stages seem way too rule-based
 - Is this a "linear" maturation?
- Moral reasoning sometimes doesn't come into play at all
 - People sometimes just go with their gut

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Exercise

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- WWBMD?
 - What would Batman do?*
- WWJBD?
 - What would Jeremy Bentham do?
- WWIKD?
 - What would Immanuel Kant do?
- WWAWWWWDIND?
 - What would Aristotle Whose Ethics Were Written Down in Nicomachus do?

*Actually Batman rarely acts as an ethical agent...

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Exercise: the Ford Pinto

- Were Ford's actions right or wrong? Why?
 - In some systems you can argue either way. **Try to consider both sides.**
- WWJBD?
 - What is a utilitarian/consequentialist analysis of Ford's actions?
- WWIKD?
 - What is a deontological analysis?
- WWAWWWWDIND?
 - What is a virtue ethics perspective?

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