



Chapter 2

Introduction to Ethics



Chapter Overview (1/2)

- Introduction
- Subjective relativism
- Cultural relativism
- Divine command theory
- Kantianism

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Chapter Overview (2/2)

- Act utilitarianism
- Rule utilitarianism
- Social contract theory
- Comparing workable ethical theories
- Morality of breaking the law

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Introduction

- Taking the Ethical Point of View
- Defining Terms
- Four Scenarios
- Overview of Ethical Theories

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The Ethical Point of View

- Virtually everybody shares “core values”
 - Life
 - Happiness
 - Ability to accomplish goals
- Two ways to view world
 - Selfish point of view: consider only own core values
 - Ethical point of view: respect other people and their core values

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Defining Terms

- Society:
 - Association of people organized under a system of rules
 - Rules: advance the good of members over time
- Morality
 - A society’s rules of conduct
 - What people ought / ought not to do in various situations
- Ethics
 - Rational examination of morality
 - Evaluation of people’s behavior

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Why Study Ethics?

- Not everyone can do what they want
- Ethics: A way to decide the best thing to do
- New problems accompany new technologies
- “Common wisdom” not always adequate

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Scenario 1 (p. 55)

- Did Alexis do anything wrong?
- Who benefited from Alexis's course of action?
- Who was hurt by Alexis's course of action?
- Did Alexis have an unfair advantage over her high school classmates?
- Would any of your answers change if it turns out Alexis did not win a college scholarship after all?
- In what other ways could Alexis have accomplished her objective?

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Scenario 2 (p. 57)

- Did the anti-spam organization do anything wrong?
- Did the ISPs that refused to accept email from the blacklisted ISPs do anything wrong?
- Who benefited from the organization's action?
- Who was hurt by the organization's action?
- Could the organization have achieved its goals through a better course of action?

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Scenario 3 (p. 57)

- Did the East Dakota State Police do anything wrong?
- Who benefited from the actions of the EDSP?
- Who was harmed by the actions of the EDSP?
- What other courses of action could the EDSP have taken to achieve its objectives?

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Scenario 4 (p. 58)

- Should you recommend release of the product next week?
- Who will benefit if the company follows your recommendation?
- Who will be harmed if the company follows your recommendation?
- Do you have an obligation to any group of people that may be affected by your decision?

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More on Ethics

- Ethics: rational, systematic analysis
 - “Doing ethics”: answers need explanations
 - Explanations: facts, shared values, logic
- Ethics: voluntary, moral choices
- Workable ethical theory: produces explanations that might be persuasive to a skeptical, yet open-minded audience

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Subjective Relativism

- Relativism
 - No universal norms of right and wrong
 - One person can say "X is right," another can say "X is wrong," and both can be right
- Subjective relativism
 - Each person decides right and wrong for himself or herself
 - "What's right for you may not be right for me"

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Case for Subjective Relativism

- Well-meaning and intelligent people disagree on moral issues
- Ethical debates are disagreeable and pointless

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Case Against Subjective Relativism

- Blurs distinction between doing what you think is right and doing what you want to do
- Makes no moral distinction between the actions of different people
- SR and tolerance are two different things
- Decisions may not be based on reason
- Not a workable ethical theory

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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

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Case for Cultural Relativism

- Different social contexts demand different moral guidelines
- It is arrogant for one society to judge another
- Morality is reflected in actual behavior

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Case Against Cultural Relativism

- Because two societies **do** have different moral views doesn’t mean they **ought to** have different views
- Doesn’t explain how moral guidelines are determined
- Doesn’t explain how guidelines evolve
- Provides no way out for cultures in conflict
- Because many practices are acceptable does not mean any cultural practice is acceptable (many/any fallacy)
- Societies do, in fact, share certain core values
- Only indirectly based on reason
- Not a workable ethical theory

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Divine Command Theory

- Good actions: those aligned with God's will
- Bad actions: those contrary to God's will
- Holy books reveal God's will.
- We should use holy books as moral decision-making guides.

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Case for Divine Command Theory

- We owe obedience to our Creator.
- God is all-good and all-knowing.
- God is the ultimate authority.

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Case Against Divine Command Theory

- Different holy books disagree
- Society is multicultural, secular
- Some moral problems not addressed in scripture
- "The good" ≠ "God" (equivalence fallacy)
- Based on obedience, not reason

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Kantianism

- Good will: the desire to do the right thing
- Immanuel Kant: Only thing in the world good without qualification is good will.
- Reason should cultivate desire to do right thing.

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Categorical Imperative (1st Formulation)

Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws.

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Illustration of 1st Formulation

- Question: Can a person in dire straits make a promise with the intention of breaking it later?
- Proposed rule: "I may make promises with the intention of later breaking them."
- The person in trouble wants his promise to be believed so he can get what he needs.
- Universalize rule: Everyone may make & break promises
- Everyone breaking promises would make promises unbelievable, contradicting desire to have promise believed
- The rule is flawed. The answer is "No."

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Categorical Imperative (2nd Formulation)

Act so that you treat both yourself and other people as ends in themselves and never only as a means to an end.

This is usually an easier formulation to work with than the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative.

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Plagiarism Scenario

- Carla
 - Single mother
 - Works full time
 - Takes two evening courses/semester
- History class
 - Requires more work than normal
 - Carla earning an "A" on all work so far
 - Carla doesn't have time to write final report
- Carla purchases report and submits it as her own work

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Kantian Evaluation (1st Formulation)

- Carla wants credit for plagiarized report
- Rule: "You may claim credit for work performed by someone else"
- If rule universalized, reports would no longer be credible indicator's of student's knowledge, and professors would not give credit for reports
- Proposal moral rule is self-defeating
- It is wrong for Carla to turn in a purchased report

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Kantian Evaluation (2nd Formulation)

- Carla submitted another person's work as her own
- She attempted to deceive professor
- She treated professor as a means to an end
 - End: passing the course
 - Means: professor issues grade
- What Carla did was wrong

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Case for Kantianism

- Rational
- Produces universal moral guidelines
- Treats all persons as moral equals
- Workable ethical theory

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Case Against Kantianism

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

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Utilitarianism

- Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
- An action is good if it benefits someone
- An action is bad if it harms someone
- Utility: tendency of an object to produce happiness or prevent unhappiness for an individual or a community
- Happiness = advantage = benefit = good = pleasure
- Unhappiness = disadvantage = cost = evil = pain

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**Principle of Utility
(Greatest Happiness Principle)**

An action is right (or wrong) to the extent that it increases (or decreases) the total happiness of the affected parties.

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Act Utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism
 - Morality of an action has nothing to do with intent
 - Focuses on the consequences
 - A consequentialist theory
- Act utilitarianism
 - Add up change in happiness of all affected beings
 - Sum > 0, action is good
 - Sum < 0, action is bad

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Bentham: Weighing Pleasure/Pain

- Intensity
- Duration
- Certainty
- Propinquity (kinskhip, nearness in place and time)
- Fecundity (intellectually productive or inventive to a marked degree)
- Purity
- Extent

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Highway Routing Scenario

- State may replace a curvy stretch of highway
- New highway segment 1 mile shorter
- 150 houses would have to be removed
- Some wildlife habitat would be destroyed

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Evaluation

- Costs
 - \$20 million to compensate homeowners
 - \$10 million to construct new highway
 - Lost wildlife habitat worth \$1 million
- Benefits
 - \$39 million savings in automobile driving costs
- Conclusion
 - Benefits exceed costs
 - Building highway a good action

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Case for Act Utilitarianism

- Focuses on happiness
- Down-to-earth (practical)
- Comprehensive
- Workable ethical theory

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Case Against Act Utilitarianism

- Unclear whom to include in calculations
- Too much work
- Ignores our innate sense of duty
- Susceptible to the problem of moral luck

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Rule Utilitarianism

- We ought to adopt moral rules which, if followed by everyone, will lead to the greatest increase in total happiness
- Act utilitarianism applies Principle of Utility to individual actions
- Rule utilitarianism applies Principle of Utility to moral rules

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Anti-Worm Scenario

- August 2003: Blaster worm infected thousands of Windows computers
- Soon after, Nachi worm appeared
 - 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

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Evaluation using Rule Utilitarianism

- 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
- 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. Releasing anti-worm is wrong.

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Case for Rule Utilitarianism

- Compared to act utilitarianism, it is easier to perform the utilitarian calculus.
- Not every moral decision requires performing utilitarian calculus.
- Moral rules survive exceptional situations
- Avoids the problem of moral luck
- Workable ethical theory

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Case Against Utilitarianism in General

- All consequences must be measured on a single scale.
- Utilitarianism ignores the problem of an unjust distribution of good consequences.
 - Utilitarianism does **not** mean “the greatest good of the greatest number”
 - That requires a principle of justice
 - What happens when a conflict arises between the Principle of Utility and a principle of justice?

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Social Contract Theory

- Thomas Hobbes
 - “State of nature”
 - We implicitly accept a social contract
 - Establishment of moral rules to govern relations among citizens
 - Government capable of enforcing these rules
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau
 - In ideal society, no one above rules
 - That prevents society from enacting bad rules

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James Rachels’s Definition

“Morality consists in the set of rules, governing how people are to treat one another, that rational people will agree to accept, for their mutual benefit, on the condition that others follow those rules as well.”

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Kinds of Rights

- Negative right: A right that another can guarantee by leaving you alone
- Positive right: A right obligating others to do something on your behalf
- Absolute right: A right guaranteed without exception
- Limited right: A right that may be restricted based on the circumstances

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John Rawls's Principles of Justice

- Each person may claim a "fully adequate" number of basic rights and liberties, so long as these claims are consistent with everyone else having a claim to the same rights and liberties
- Any social and economic inequalities must
 - Be associated with positions that everyone has a fair and equal opportunity to achieve
 - Be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle)

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DVD Rental Scenario

- Bill owns chain of DVD rental stores
- Collects information about rentals from customers
- Constructs profiles of customers
- Sells profiles to direct marketing firms
- Some customers happy to receive more mail order catalogs; others unhappy at increase in "junk mail"

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Evaluation (Social Contract Theory)

- Consider rights of Bill, customers, and mail order companies.
- Does customer have right to expect name, address to be kept confidential?
- If customer rents DVD from Bill, who owns information about transaction?
- If Bill and customer have equal rights to information, Bill did nothing wrong to sell information.
- If customers have right to expect name and address or transaction to be confidential without giving permission, then Bill was wrong to sell information without asking for permission.

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Case for Social Contract Theory

- Framed in language of rights
- Explains why people act in self-interest without common agreement
- Provides clear analysis of certain citizen/ government problems
- Workable ethical theory

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Case Against Social Contract Theory

- No one signed contract
- Some actions have multiple characterizations
- Conflicting rights problem
- May unjustly treat people who cannot uphold contract

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Objectivism vs. Relativism

- Objectivism: Morality has an existence outside the human mind
- Relativism: Morality is a human invention
- Kantianism, utilitarianism, and social contract theory examples of objectivism

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Comparing Workable Ethical Theories

| <i>Theory</i> | <i>Motivation</i> | <i>Criteria</i> | <i>Focus</i> |
|---------------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------|
| Kantianism | Dutifulness | Rules | Individual |
| Act Utilitarianism | Consequence | Actions | Group |
| Rule Utilitarianism | Consequence / Duty | Rules | Group |
| Social Contract | Rights | Rules | Individual |

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Morality of Breaking the Law

- Social contract theory perspective
- Kantian perspective
- Rule utilitarian perspective
- Act utilitarian perspective
- Conclusion

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