

# CS 4001: Computing, Society & Professionalism

Munmun De Choudhury | Assistant Professor | School of Interactive Computing

**Week 2: Utilitarianism**  
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# Communities and Societies

- The world consists of many communities.
- Communities provide many benefits to the people living in them. E.g., they protect people against external dangers, and facilitate the exchange of goods and services.
- Communities foster the development of fulfilling personal relationships
- However communities prohibit certain actions and make other actions obligatory

# Communities and Societies

- Communities give rise to societies
- A society is an association of people organized under a system of rules designed to advance the good of its members over time
- **Cooperation** among individuals helps promote the common good.
  - How ever people in a society also compete with each other, e.g., when deciding how to divide limited benefits among themselves.
- Every society has rules of conduct deciding what people ought and ought not to do in various situations. ***We call these rules morality***

# Moral dilemmas

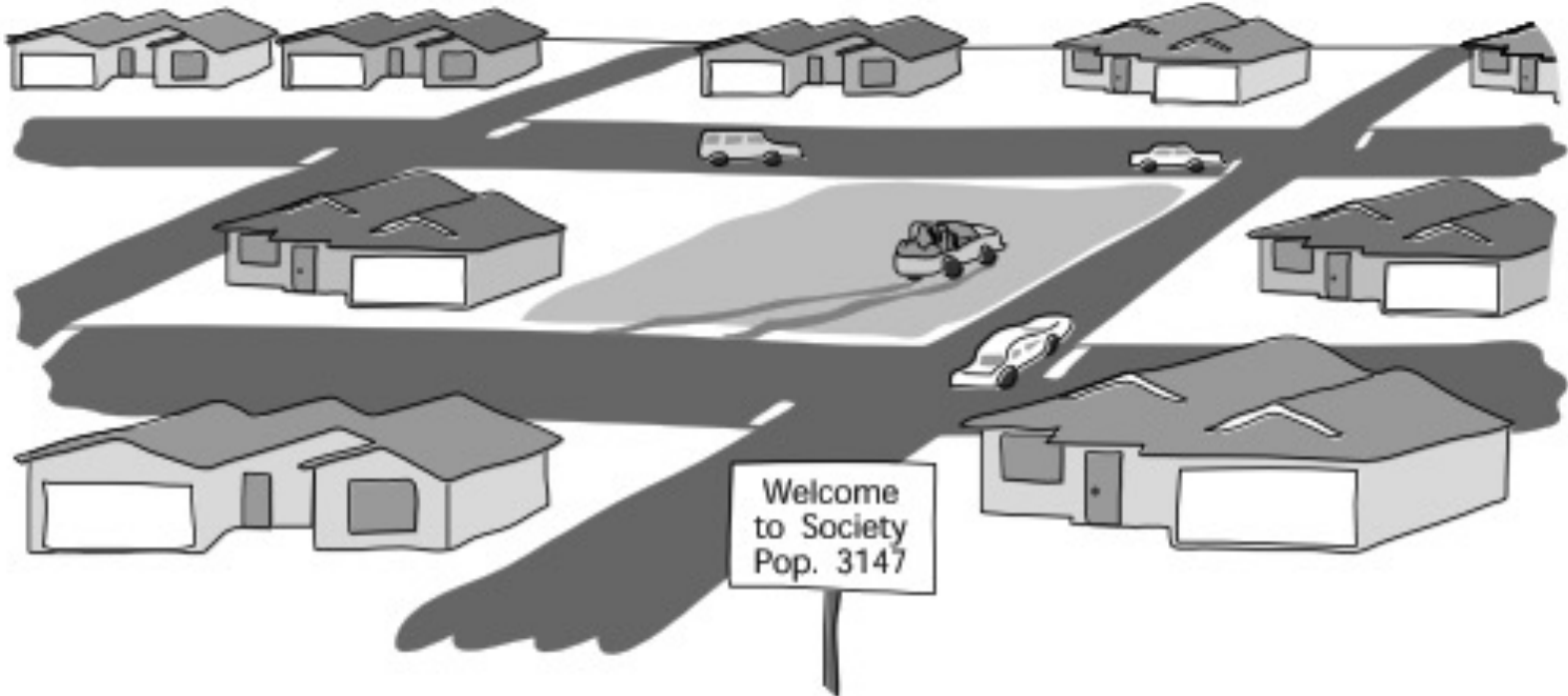
- A person may simultaneously belong to multiple communities/societies, which can lead to moral dilemmas.
  - E.g., what happens when a pacifist (according to the rules of their religion) is drafted in the armed forces (according to the laws of their nation)?

# Ethics

- Ethics is the philosophical study of morality, a rational examination into people's moral beliefs and behaviors.
  - It studies free human acts from the point of view of their moral value (their goodness or badness) in relations to a society's ultimate end
- Ethics is also termed as **moral philosophy** as it involves systematizing, defending, and recommending concepts of right and wrong behavior

# The aim of ethics

- To obtain true and systematic knowledge of upright and authentic human behavior based on universal principles
- To establish a series of norms and criteria for judging human acts
- To study the basic truths about the human nature in order to discover the deepest and most common truths about the human person
- To establish guiding principles that facilitate life in a community or society
- To come up with practices and customs that foster responsible and good habits in a personal conduct



# Ethical Theories

- Formal study started with Socrates
- Ethical theories are frameworks for moral decision making
- We need ethical theories to examine moral problems behind an issue, reach conclusions, and defend those conclusions in front of a skeptical, yet open-minded audience
- Used to provide logical, persuasive justifications behind your reasoning in the case of an argument



# Class Activity 1

- Carefully read the scenario passage given in the handed out document
- After that, come up with your own answer to each of the listed questions following the passages

# Discussion Point

- The scenario shows there's no objective one answer
- But if everyone agreed to take the ethical point of view by respecting others and their core values, would we need rigorous ethical theories as guiding principles?

# Ethical Relativism

- It is the theory that there are no universal moral norms of right and wrong.
- That is, different individuals or groups of people can have completely opposite views of a moral problem, and both can be right
- Two kinds of ethical relativism: *subjective relativism* and *cultural relativism*

# Subjective Relativism

- Argument: morality is not like “gravity”; it is not something “out there” that rational people can discover and try to understand
- The case for subjective relativism:
  - Each of us (well meaning and intelligent people) creates his or her own morality
    - E.g., the abortion debate
  - Ethical debates are pointless as it is not required to reconcile opposing views

# Subjective Relativism

- The case against subjective relativism:
  - The line between doing what you think is right and doing what you want to do is not sharply drawn
  - By allowing each person to decide right and wrong for themselves, the theory makes no moral distinction between the actions of different people
  - Tolerance is inconsistent with this theory
  - We should not give legitimacy to an ethical theory that allows people to make decisions based on something other than reason
    - People are good at legitimizing bad behaviors
    - This allows people to reach their conclusion as they see fit e.g., by rolling a dice

# Scenario Question

- Both Adolf Hitler and Mother Teresa spent their lives working towards what they believed was right
- Can you explain the morality of their actions with subjective relativism? Why or why not?
  - Idea: “I can decide what is right for me, as long as it does not hurt other people”

# Cultural Relativism

- It is the ethical theory that the meaning of right and wrong rests with a society's actual moral guidelines.
  - These guidelines vary from place to place and from time to time
- The case for cultural relativism:
  - Different social contexts demand different moral guidelines
  - It is arrogant for one society to judge another

# Cultural Relativism

- The case against cultural relativism:
  - Just because two societies have different views about right and wrong, it does not imply that they ought to have different views
    - E.g., Human sacrifices versus water tunnel creation during a severe drought
  - Cultural relativism does not explain how an individual determines the moral guidelines of a particular society
  - It does not explain how to determine right or wrong when there are no cultural norms
    - E.g., sharing copyrighted material



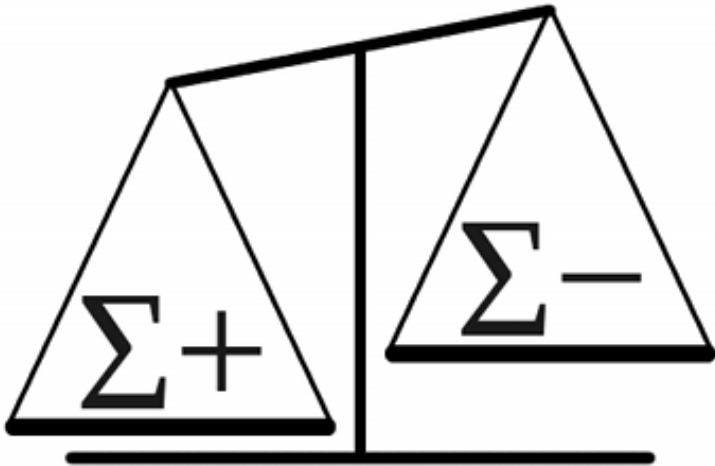
# Cultural Relativism

- It does not do a good job of characterizing actions when moral guidelines evolve
- **It provides no framework for reconciliation for cultures in conflict**
- The existence of many acceptable cultural practices does not imply any cultural practice is acceptable
- Cultures do in fact share certain core values
  - Caring for infants
- It is only indirectly based on reason
  - E.g., traditions develop because they meet a need, but over time people accept them “as is”, and lose sight of the rationality behind the tradition



# Utilitarianism

# Act Utilitarianism



- An action is good if its benefits exceeds its harms
- An action is bad if its harms exceed its benefits
- This theory is called utilitarianism, based upon the principle of utility\*, or the Greatest Happiness Principle
- \* Utility is the tendency of an object to produce happiness or prevent unhappiness for an individual or a community

# Act Utilitarianism

- The case for act utilitarianism:
  - It focuses on happiness
  - It is practical
    - E.g., at which location in a city should a new prison be built?
  - It is comprehensive
    - Allows the moral agent to take into account all elements of a particular situation
    - E.g., telling your partner about their bad haircut

# Act Utilitarianism

- The case against act utilitarianism:
  - It is not clear where to draw the line between happiness and harm; this affects the outcome of our evaluation
  - Not practical to always put so much energy into every moral decision
  - It ignores our innate sense of duty
    - People acting out of duty or obligation
    - E.g., Keeping or breaking a promise

# Act Utilitarianism

- The case against act utilitarianism:
  - We cannot predict with certainty the consequences of an action
    - Unforeseen consequences
  - It is susceptible to the problem of moral luck
    - E.g., sending flowers to an aunt in hospital, who has an allergic reaction

# Rule Utilitarianism

- Rule utilitarianism is a form of utilitarianism that says an action is right as it conforms to a rule that leads to the greatest good, or that "the rightness or wrongness of a particular action is a function of the correctness of the rule of which it is an instance

# Rule Utilitarianism

- It is the ethical theory that holds that we ought to adopt those moral rules, that if followed by everyone, lead to the greatest increase in total happiness over all affected parties
- *Main difference with act utilitarianism:* the principle of utility is applied to moral utilities, whereas in act utilitarianism it is applied to the individual moral actions



# Rule Utilitarianism

- The case for:
  - Not every moral decision requires performing an analysis of individual actions
  - Exceptional situations do not overthrow moral rules
  - Rule utilitarianism solves the problem of moral luck
  - It reduces the problem of bias
    - E.g., less need to ask “Is it okay for me to do this?” – may inflate personal benefits inadvertently or deflate the anticipated harms
  - It appeals to a wide cross-section of the society

# Summary: Utilitarianism

- The case against:
  - It forces us to use a single scale or measure to evaluate completely different kinds of consequences
    - E.g., How to quantify the value of human life, divorces caused by displaced families
  - It ignores the problem of an unjust distribution of good consequences
    - E.g., policy A results in 100 units of happiness to everyone; policy B in 201 units of happiness to half the people and nothing to the rest

# Class Activity 2

- Analyze with act and rule utilitarianism.



# Extra Slides

# Cultural Relativism Examples

- Polygamy
- Women not driving cars
- Hazing (fraternities)
- Residents working 36 hour shifts

# Class Activity E1

- Kao lives in Laos and really enjoys watching movies. The only way to watch movies (that he can afford) is to buy the illegally pirated versions sold on the streets of Vientiane, which he does when he has the money
- **Is what he does unethical?**
- **Examine with ethical relativism and utilitarianism**

# Class Activity E2

- John also really enjoy watching movies and is a tourist in Laos. John buys the pirated ones on the streets to take back to Canada; he also know this helps the local economy.
- **Is what John did unethical?**
- **Examine with ethical relativism and utilitarianism**

# Analysis

- Who benefits?
- Who gets harmed?
- What other ways can Kao or John achieve their objectives?
- What additional information would you need to evaluate whether this was an ethical decision?