

CS 4001: Computing, Society & Professionalism

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Week 3: Deontology and Social
Contract Theory
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Deontological ethics or deontology (from Greek word, *deon*, "obligation, duty") is the normative ethical position that judges the morality of an action based on rules. It is sometimes described as "duty-" or "obligation-" or "rule-" based ethics, because rules "bind you to your duty."

What is deontological ethics?

Deontologists

- An act is right if, and only if, it conforms to the relevant moral obligation; and it is wrong if, and only if, it violates the relevant moral obligation
- They argue that the consequences of an action are irrelevant to moral evaluation
- They emphasize that the value of an action lies in motive, especially motives of obligation
- Ex. Sending flowers to sick aunt; replying to your mom / partner's haircut

Kant's Moral Theory

- Historical Background
 - Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
- Kantianism is based on the writing of philosopher Kant.
- He believed that people should be guided by **universal moral laws**. For these laws to apply to all rational humans, they must be based on reason.
- Kant said that the only thing that is good without qualification is a **good will**.

Kant's Moral Theory

- Historical Background
 - Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)
- The concept of the “good will”
- The concept of duty

Good Will

- An action has moral worth only when performed by an agent who possesses a good will
- An agent has a good will only if moral obligation based on a universally valid norm is the action's sole motive

Duty

- All persons must act not only *in accordance with*, but *for the sake of*, obligation
- A person's motive for acting must rest in a recognition that what he or she intends is demanded by an obligation
- Assumption that people are rational and are dutiful
 - A dutiful person feels compelled to act in a certain way due to respect for a universal moral rule

Kant's Moral Theory

- Two principles
 - The Hypothetical Imperative
 - The Categorical Imperative

Hypothetical Imperative

- It defines the means taken to achieve an end
- These imperatives command conditionally on your having a relevant desire.
- “If I want to obtain *e*, then I must obtain means *m*.”
 - E.g. “If I want to buy a house, then I must work hard to make enough money for a down payment.”

Categorical Imperative

- All humans must obey moral rules unconditionally.
- The supreme principle or moral law.
- Morality must be based on the categorical imperative because morality is such that you are commanded by it, and is such that you cannot opt out of it or claim that it does not apply to you.
- Every moral agent recognizes whenever accepting an action as morally obligatory

Categorical Imperative

- Something becomes a universal moral law when:
 - It requires unconditional conformity by all rational beings, regardless of circumstances
 - Is unconditional and applicable at all times

Categorical Imperative

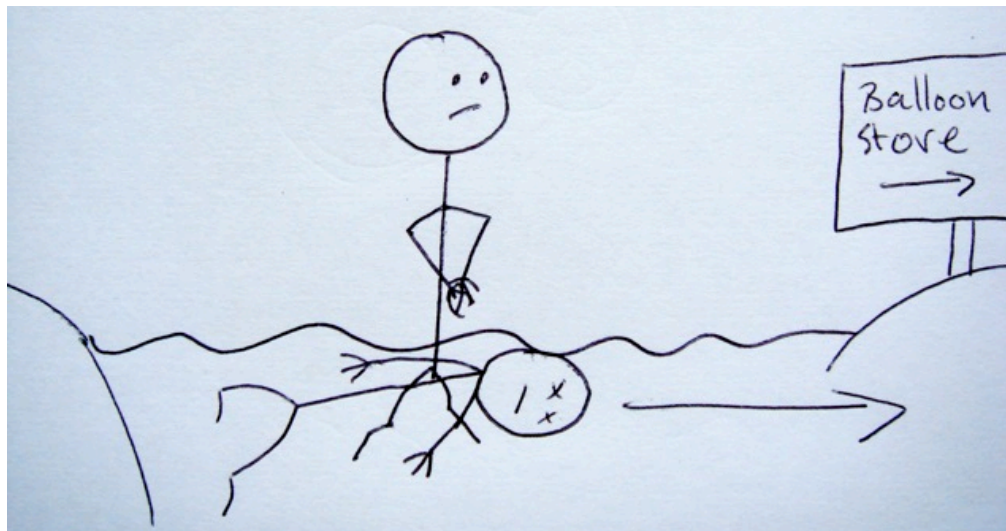
- Why is the categorical imperative?
 - Human beings are imperfect creatures and hence need rules imposed upon
 - These rules enjoin us to do or not to do something thus we conceive them as necessitating our action

Categorical Imperative: Two Formulations

- **Act only in such a way in which the maxim of action can be rationally willed as a universal law**
- Main idea:
 - Do unto others as you would have them do unto you (“mentally reverse roles”)

Categorical Imperative: Two Formulations

- **Act so that you always treat both yourself and other people as ends in themselves and never only as a means to an end**
- Main idea:
 - Treat others as you would like to be treated



An Example: Lying

- (1) We should do only those actions that conform to rules that we could will be adopted universally.
- (2) If we were to lie, we would be following the rule “It is permissible to lie.”
- (3) This rule could not be adopted universally, because it would be self-defeating: people would stop believing one another, and then it would do no good to lie.
- (4) Therefore, we should not lie.

Class Activity 1 – Kantian scenario

- Suppose Mike manages a semiconductor fabrication plant for a large corporation. The plant manufactures integrated circuits on 8-inch wafers. Mike knows that in one year the corporation is going to shut down the plant and move all of its production to other sites capable of producing 12-inch wafers. In the meanwhile Mike needs new employees to work in the clean room. Many of the best applicants are from out of state. Mike is afraid that if they knew the plant was going to shut down next year, they would not want to go through the hassle and expense of moving to this area. If that happens, Mike will have to hire less qualified local workers.
- Should Mike disclose this information to the job applicants?

Kantianism

- The Case For:
 - It treats all persons as moral equals
 - It gives all persons moral worth by considering them as rational, autonomous beings
 - Everyone is held to the same standard
 - It produces universal moral guidelines
- What is the difference with the Cultural Relativism theory?

Kantianism

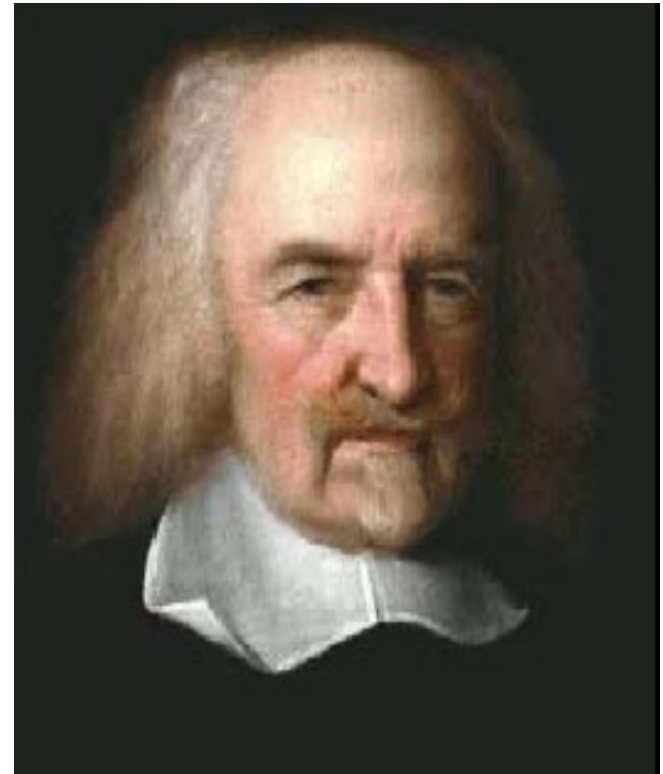
- The Case Against:
 - Sometimes no single rule fully characterizes a situation
 - Sometimes there is no way to resolve a conflict between rules
 - Kantianism allows no exception to perfect duties

Social Contract Theory

Thomas Hobbes

Social Contract Theory

Lived during the English civil war era and saw the consequences of social anarchy



Life in a State of Nature


No laws or government.

No rules of morality.

Everyone for themselves.

Anyone has the ability to kill anyone.

Hobbes calls this a “state of WAR”.



Why the state of nature is bad

No industry

No society

No agriculture

No pleasure

No seafaring

Continual Fear



Why does this occur?

There is equality of need.

There is scarcity of resources.

There is essential equality of human power.

There is limited altruism.

Contract Law and Morality

Enter into a covenant with other people.

This is the basis of and reason for acting morally.

Explains the foundations of contracts: you both agree to give up some liberties.

In a state of nature, “upon any reasonable suspicion” the contract is void. (*Leviathan*, 1.14.18)



The Social Contract

Morality is the set of rules that rational people will agree to obey, for their mutual benefit, provided that other people will obey them as well.

Position of SCT

- “ . . . parties do not know their conception of the good or their special psychological propensities . . . ”
.
- The terms of the social contact are chosen behind a veil of ignorance.
 - This ensures that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles or rules by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances

Class Activity 2

- Sam sells DVDs and has a database of customers and their demographic information
- He sells them to third party mail-order companies.
- Some people don't mind it and even buy things from those companies. Some people are annoyed due to the excess "junk mail".
- Did Sam did an ethical thing?

Social Contract Theory

- The Case For:
 - It is framed in the language of rights
 - It is based on a solid understanding of human nature, recognizing that rational people act out of self-interest in the absence of a common agreement
 - It explains why under certain circumstances civil disobedience can be a morally right decision

Social Contract Theory

- The Case Against:
 - None of us signed the contract
 - Some actions can be characterized in multiple ways
 - It does not explain how to solve a moral problem when the analysis reveals conflicting rights
 - It may be unjust to those people who are incapable of upholding their side of the contract

Class Activity 3

- Comparison

Rawl's Principles of Justice

- [E.g., Liberty] Each person may claim a “fully adequate” number of basic rights and liberties such as freedom of thought and speech, freedom of association, the right to be safe from harm, and the right to own property, so long as these claims are consistent with everyone else having a claim to the same rights and liberties

Rawl's Principles of Justice

- [E.g., Fairness/Wealth] Any social and economic inequalities must satisfy two conditions: first they are associated with positions in society that everyone has a fair and equal opportunity to assume; and second, they are “to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of the society” (the difference principle)