CS 4873: Computing, Society & Professionalism

Munmun De Choudhury | Assistant Professor | School of Interactive Computing

Week 2: Utilitarianism

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Read Class Readings!

- Reminder – we need you to read the class readings or go through the lecture slides at a minimum to ensure proper participation at the recitation sections.

- Please also go through the week's discussion guide, so that you are informed of what will be happening at the section that particular week.

Homework Assignments

- Homework 1 due today!

- Homework 2 available – about politics of an artifact.

Ethical Theory 1

Ethical Theory 2

Ethical Theory 3

Welcome to Society Pop. 3147
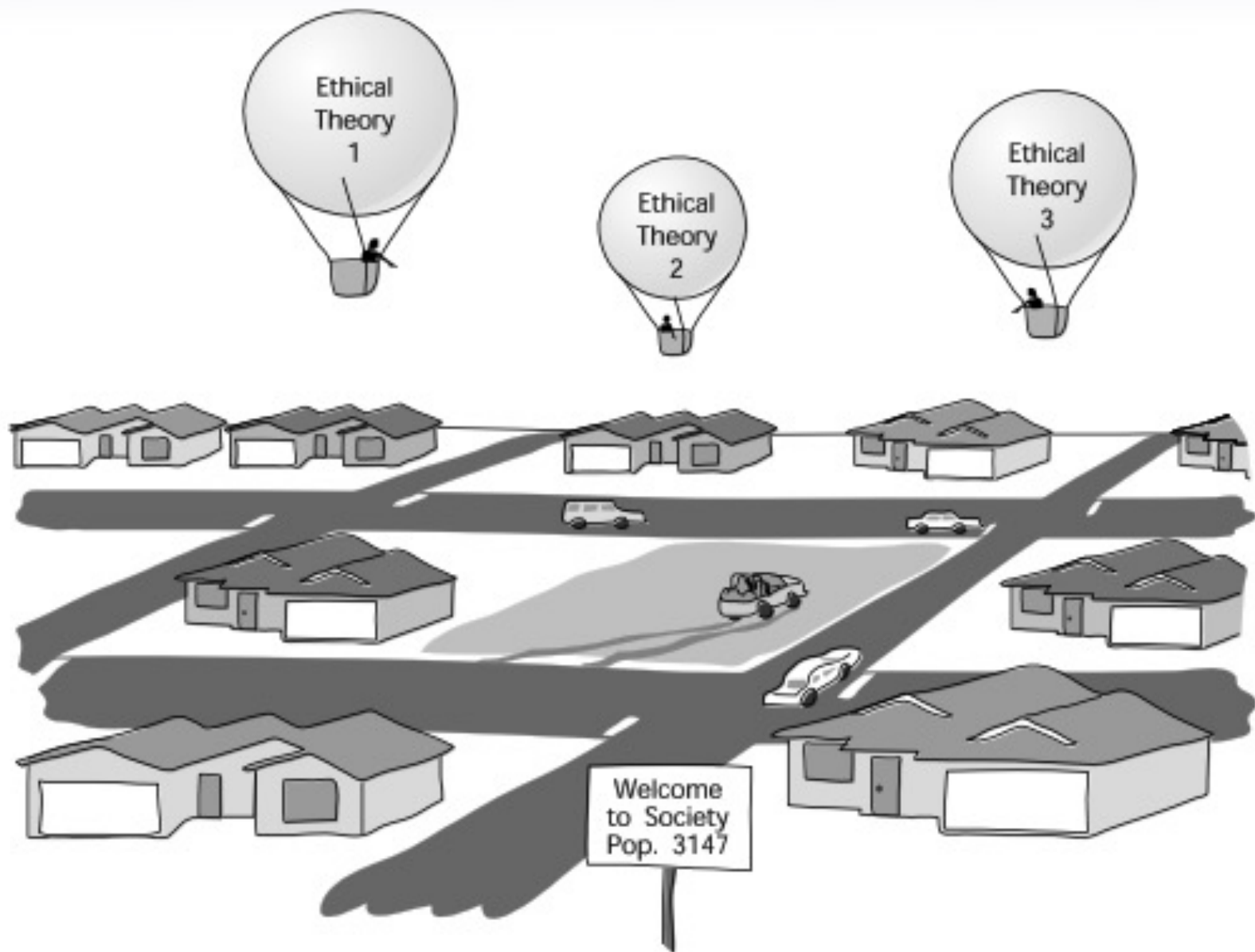
* Ethical Theories

- 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

* Why ethical theories?

Detering speeders

- ** Scenario 3, p. 53 Quinn
  - East Dakota State Police (EDSP) installs cameras to detect speeders on the highway.
  - It takes picture of the driver and matches with the photo on the car's registration/license plate information.
  - FBI asks for these data.
  - Three months later five members of a terrorist organization are arrested.

- Did EDSP do anything wrong?

- Who benefited? Who was harmed?

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

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"

Subjective Relativism

- Subjective relativism is often unworkable

- 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

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

- ** William Graham Sumner's position (p. 58)
  - Moral guidelines of a community, known as "folkways"

Cultural Relativism

- The case for cultural relativism:

    - Different social contexts demand different moral guidelines

    - It is arrogant for one society to judge another

Cultural Relativism Examples

- Polygamy

- Women not driving cars

- Hazing (fraternities)

- Residents working 36 hour shifts

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
        - Pacifist (according to religion) is drafted to serve in the military
    - It does not explain how to determine right or wrong when there are no cultural norms

An example where there are no cultural norms, so you can't apply cultural relativism?

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
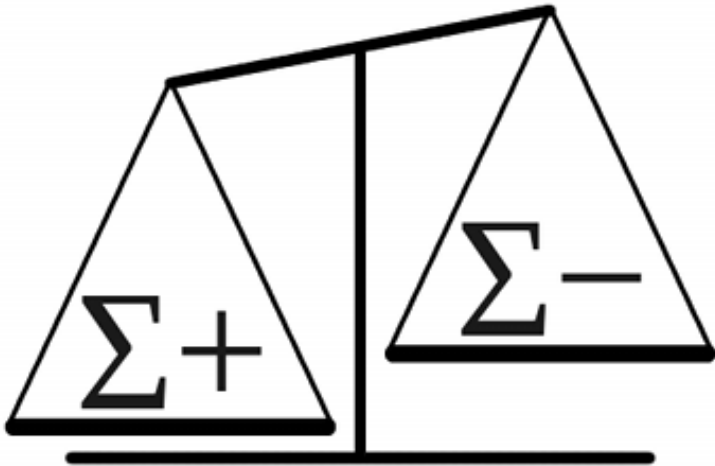
Utilitarianism

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

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

Discussion Example

- ** Quinn Section 2.7.2 (p.74)
    - A state is considering replacing a curvy stretch of highway that passes along the outskirts of a large city.
        - Will reduce commute time for many drivers
    - About 150 houses lie on or near the proposed path
        - All of them will need to be condemned.
    - Lost habitat of some species – environmental impact
    - Would building the highway be a good action?

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 applies 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

Discussion Point A

- 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**

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?

Discussion Point B

- 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?

Limitations of Utilitarianism

- Not all benefits are the same or can be equally weighted

- Not all harms can be quantified

- ** Seven attributes that can be considered as a solution (by Bentham)