

# CS 4873: Computing, Society & Professionalism

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## Week 3: Deontology

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\* Harry Truman and  
Elizabeth Anscombe

- Thinking in contrast to thinking in terms of consequences
- Recap Utilitarianism
  - The moral outcome of an action rests entirely on the results of the action, rather than any type of intent behind the action

| Utilitarianism  | Kantianism   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consequentialist</li><li>• The consequences are most important.</li><li>• Pleasure over Pain; calculation of "utility" is mathematical.</li></ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Deontological</li><li>• The motive is what matters, not the consequences.</li><li>• The Categorical Imperative reigns supreme.</li></ul> |

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**.

# Good Will

- An action has moral worth only when performed by an agent who possesses a good will
- When does an agent have 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.”
  - “I must study to pass this exam.”



But Kant argued, hypothetical moral systems cannot persuade moral action or be regarded as bases for moral judgments against others, because the imperatives on which they are based rely too heavily on subjective considerations.

# Categorical Imperative

- Why 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

- 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

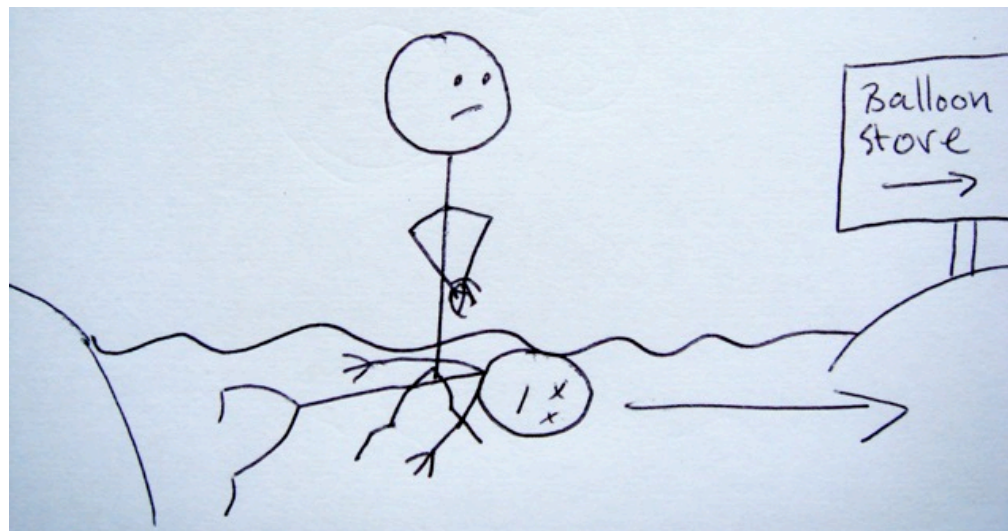
- Something becomes a universal moral law when:
  - It requires unconditional conformity by all rational beings, regardless of circumstances
  - Is unconditional and applicable at all times

# Categorical Imperative: 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

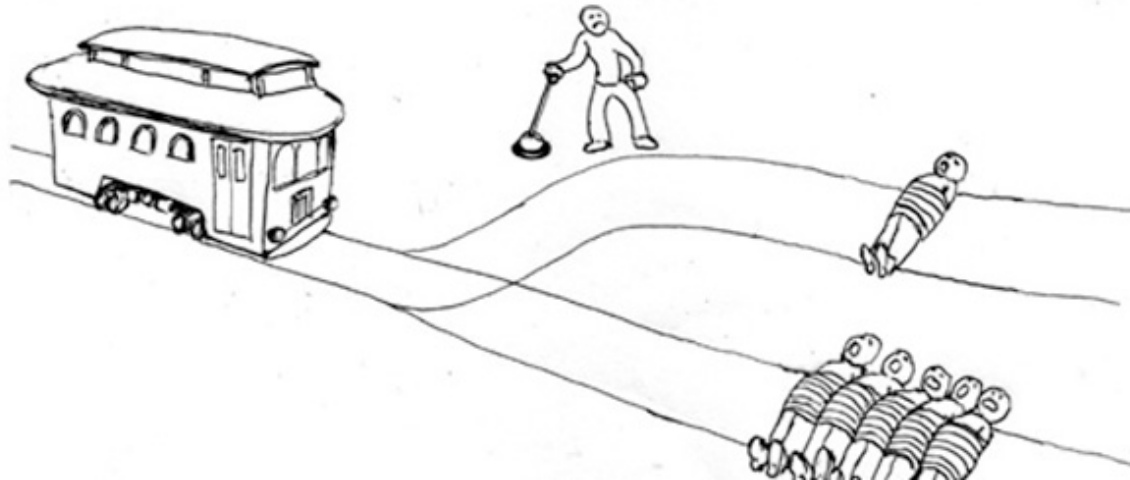
- (1) We should do only those actions that conform to rules that we could will be adopted universally.
- (2) If we were to lie, we would be following the rule “It is permissible to lie.”
- (3) This rule could not be adopted universally, because it would be self-defeating: people would stop believing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


# Class Discussion 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?


# Class Discussion 2: Kantianism and the Trolley Problem

- Trolley problem at the Good Place
- Contrast with utilitarianism






What is the difference of  
Kantianism with the Cultural  
Relativism theory?




Many of Kant's contemporaries  
thought that his insistence on  
absolute rules was strange



Imagine that some- one is fleeing from a murderer and tells you that he is going home to hide. Then the murderer comes by and asks you where the man is. You believe that, if you tell the truth, you will be aiding in a murder. Furthermore, the killer is already headed the right way, so if you simply remain silent, the worst result is likely. What should you do? Let's call this the Case of the Inquiring Murderer. Under these circumstances, most of us think, you should lie. After all, which is more important: telling the truth or saving someone's life?



\* Kant's response: "On a Supposed Right to Lie from Altruistic Motives"



A similar argument would apply to Truman's decision to drop the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

Truman was betting hundreds of thousands of lives on the mere hope that good results might ensue.



# 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

# Kantianism

- The Case Against:
  - Most times we can be quite confident of what the consequences of our actions will be, in which case we need not hesitate because of uncertainty.
  - Kant seems to assume that we would be morally responsible for any bad consequences of lying, but we would *not* be responsible for any bad consequences of telling the truth.

# Kantianism

- The Case Against:
  - Sometimes no single rule fully characterizes a situation
  - Sometimes there is no way to resolve a conflict between rules
    - \* Suppose it is held to be absolutely wrong to do X in any circumstances and absolutely right to do Y in any circumstances. Then what about the case in which a person must choose between doing X and doing Y?
  - Kantianism allows no exception to perfect duties