Ethical Concepts and Theories

• Definitions
  
  − 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 peoples behavior
• Moral Systems
  – rules for guiding conduct
  – principles for evaluating rules

• Characteristics
  – public
    rules are known to all members
  – informal
    not like formal laws in a legal system
  – rational
    based on logic accessible to all
  – impartial
    does not favor any group or person
Derivation of Moral Systems

- Morals are derived from society’s system of values

- Intrinsic vs. Instrumental Values
  - Intrinsic
    * valued for its own sake
    * happiness, health
  - Instrumental
    * serves some other end or good
    * money
• Core vs. Non-Core Values

  – Core values
    * basic to thriving and survival of society
    * life, happiness, autonomy
    * not necessarily moral
      • self-interest vs. impartiality
• Moral vs. Non-Moral Values
  – Moral values are a subset of all values
  – Moral values are
    * public,
    * informal,
    * rational and
    * impartial

• Basic moral values are derived from core values using impartiality
Grounding Principles in a Moral System

- Religion
- Law
- Philosophy
Grounding Moral Principles in a Religious System

- Murder is wrong because it offends God
- Punishment is assured, if only in the next life
- Hard to apply in a pluralistic society
Grounding Moral Principles in a Legal System

- Murder is wrong because it violates the law.
- Laws apply to all in a society
- Punishment can be applied in this life
- Laws are not uniform across political boundaries
- Some laws are morally wrong
Grounding Moral Principles in a Philosophical System of Ethics

- Murder is wrong because it is wrong.
- Based on reason and criteria
- An act is wrong inherently or because of social consequences
- Punishment has the form of social disapproval or ostracism
- Criteria found in ethical theories
Theories

- **Need**
  - Conscience is private
  - Golden Rule fails in certain cases

- **Concern:** voluntary, moral choices

- **Characteristics**
  - Internal Coherence – Parts form a whole.
  - Consistency – No contradictions
  - Comprehensiveness – Broadly applicable
  - Systematic – General

- Workable ethical theory produces explanations that might be persuasive to a skeptical, yet open-minded audience
Ethical Theories

- Relativism: Subjective and Cultural
- Divine command theory
- Duty-Based (Kantianism)
- Consequence-Based (Utilitarianism)
- Social contract theory
- Character Based
- Just-Consequentialist
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 herself
- "What’s right for you may not be right for me"

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

Cons:
- Blurs distinction between what you think is right and what you want to do
- Makes no moral distinction between the actions of different people
- Not the same as tolerance
- Decisions may not be based on reason

- Not a workable ethical theory
Cultural Relativism

- What is right and wrong depends upon a society’s actual moral guidelines
- Guidelines vary in space and time
- An action may be right in one society and wrong in another society or time
• Pros:
  – Different contexts demand different guidelines
  – It is arrogant for one society to judge another
  – Morality is reflected in actual behavior

• Cons:
  – Because two societies do have different moral views doesn’t mean they ought to
  – 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 (many/any fallacy)
  – Societies do, in fact, share certain core values
  – Only indirectly based on reason

• Not a workable ethical theory
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.
- Use holy books as moral decision-making guides.

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

**Cons:**
- 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
Duty-Based

• Kant-only good without qualification is a good will, or the desire to do the right thing.

• Kant-morality is grounded in duty or obligation that people have to each other

• Rejects happiness or desirable consequences

• Rational capacity distinguishes human and reveals our duty to others

• Every person has the same moral worth

• Every person is an end in himself and not a means to an end

• Criticism-no conflict resolution
• Rule Deontology
  
  – *deon* is Greek for duty
  
  – A principle determines the basis for moral obligations
  
  – Categorical Imperatives
    1. Act on a rule that can be universally binding on all people
    2. Act on the rule that ensures that all people will be treated as ends in themselves (easier to apply)
  
  – Based on universality and impartiality
Example 1.

1. Act on a rule that can be universally binding on all people
   
   * 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 and break promises
   
   * Everyone breaking promises would make promises unbelievable, contradicting desire to have promise believed
   
   * The rule is flawed. The answer is No.
– Example 2.
  * Carla is a single mother who works full time
  * She 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
1. Act on a rule that can be universally binding on all people
   * 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 indicators of students’ 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
2. Act on the rule that ensures that all people will be treated as ends in themselves

* 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
- Pros
  * Rational
  * Universal moral guidelines
  * All persons are moral equals
  * Workable ethical theory
- Cons
  * Sometimes no rule adequately characterizes an action.
  * There is no way to resolve a conflict between rules.
  * Kantianism allows no exceptions to moral laws.
Act Deontology (Ross 1930)

* Provides Conflict Resolution
* Resolution through "rational intuitionism"
* Rational Intuitionism is controversial with ethicists
Consequence-Based (Utilitarianism)

- Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
- Goal: produce desirable outcomes
- Consequences are a standard for evaluation
- Morality has nothing to do with intent
  - 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
- Principle of Utility: An action is right (or wrong) to the extent that it increases (or decreases) the total happiness of the affected parties.
• Two flavors: Act Utilitarianism and Rule Utilitarianism
  – Act utilitarianism applies Principle of Utility to individual actions
  – Rule utilitarianism applies Principle of Utility to moral rules
• Act Utilitarianism
  
  – Focus on individual acts
  
  – An *act* is permissible if consequences result in the greatest good for the greatest number
  
  – Add up change in happiness of all affected beings
    
    * Sum > 0, action is good
    * Sum< 0, action is bad
  
  – Pros
    * Focuses on happiness
    * Down-to-earth (practical)
    * Comprehensive
    * Workable ethical theory
• Scenario: New Highway Construction
  – 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

• Calculate Costs, Benefits

• Decide on Morality based on calculation

• 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
• Rule Utilitarianism
  – Focus on rules
  – An act is permissible if the consequences of following a rule, of which the act is an instance, result in the greatest good for the greatest number

• Pros
  – 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
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
– 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 whose computers are invaded by buggy anti-worms
  * System administrators

– Conclusion: Harm outweighs benefits. Releasing anti-worm is wrong.
• Cons for Utilitarianism
  
  – All consequences must be measured on a single scale.
    * All units must be the same in order to do the sum
    * In certain circumstances utilitarians must quantify the value of a human life
  
  – 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?
• Contract-Based
  – Social Contracts and Individual Rights
  – Social contracts improve life, give motivation for being moral
  – Morality is limited to a formal contract
  – Minimalist and Legalistic ”do no harm”
• Rights-Based
  * Humans possess ”natural rights” independent of legal 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
• 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
• Evaluation
  – 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.
• **Pros**
  
  – 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

• **Cons**
  
  – No one signed contract
  – Some actions have multiple characterizations
  – Conflicting rights problem
  – May unjustly treat people who cannot uphold contract
Character-Based

- "Virtue ethics" of Plato and Aristotle
- Focus on criteria of character development
  acquisition of good character traits from habit
- No formal rules
- NOT what should I do? BUT what kind of a person should I be?
- Criticisms
  - no conflict resolution
  - no examination of consequences
- Challenges
  - no community standards in a pluralistic society
  - more emphasis on individual rights