Ethics

- Ethics: analysis of issues regarding performance of actions that have both positive and negative impacts

- “Doing ethics”: producing ethical judgements with explanations

  - Explanations: facts, values, logic
Ethical Theories

- Sources of values and logics for ethical explanation
- Methods for deciding whether actions are ethical
- Methods for guiding the design of ethical actions
Relativistic Ethical Theories

- Subjective relativism
- Religious relativism
- Cultural relativism
Subjective Relativism

- Subjective Relativism
  - No universal norms of right and wrong
  - Each decides right and wrong for oneself
  - “What’s right for you may not be right for me”
Case for Subjective Relativism

- Well-meaning and intelligent people can disagree on moral issues
- Ethical debates are disagreeable and pointless, as no one is convinced of other viewpoint
Issues with Subjective Relativism

- Blurs distinction between doing what you think is right and doing what you want to do (is best for you)
- Subjective Relativism and tolerance are not the same
- Decisions often not based on reason.
  lack explanations
Religious Relativism

• Most religions express moral ideals
• Good actions: those aligned with God’s will
• Bad actions: those contrary to God’s will
• Holy books reveal God’s will
  • Use as moral decision-making guides
Issues with Religious Relativism

• Holy books and their interpretations can disagree
• World is multireligious -- not same god(s) or any god
• Not all moral problems addressed in holy books, e.g., for modern information technology
• No obvious way to resolve conflicting beliefs
Cultural Relativism

- What is “right” and “wrong” depends upon a given culture’s moral guidelines or current practices.
- These guidelines vary from place to place and from time to time.
- A particular action may be right in one society at one time but wrong in another society or at another time.
Case for Cultural Relativism

- Different social contexts demand different moral guidelines
- Behavioral data indicate significant cultural differences
- It is arrogant for one society to judge another
- Morality is reflected in actual behavior within a culture
- “The defense of cultural diversity is an ethical imperative, inseparable from respect for human dignity.” (UNESCO, 2003)
Problems with Cultural Relativism

• Because two societies *do* have different moral views doesn’t mean they *should* have different views

• Doesn’t explain how moral guidelines are determined

• Provides no way for cultures in conflict to resolve issues

• Because *many* cultural practices are acceptable, does not mean *any* cultural practice is acceptable

• Societies do, in fact, share certain core values
International Perspectives

• How to create an international, information age ethics that respects cultural differences, seeks to find commonalities, and argues for some universal principles of ethics.
Western Ethical Theories

• Kantianism
• Utilitarianism
• Social contract theory
Kantianism

- Immanuel Kant

- Only thing in the world that is good without qualification is good will

- What one ought to do is more important than what one wants to do  ~~~ “sense of duty”

- Reason should cultivate a desire to do right thing
Categorical Imperative I

Act only from moral rules that are reasonable universal moral rules.
Categorical Imperative II

Act so that you treat both yourself and other people as ends in themselves and never only as a means to an end.
Assignment Scenario

- Carla
  - Is a single mother, working full time
  - Takes two evening courses/semester
- Carla’s history class
  - Requires more work than normal
  - Carla earning an “A” on all work so far
  - She doesn’t have time to write final report
- Carla purchases report online, submits it as her own
Kantian Analysis I

- Carla wants credit for plagiarized report
- General Rule: “You may claim credit for work performed by others (when you don’t have time to do the work yourself).”
- Written reports would no longer be credible indicators of a student’s ability or knowledge
- Proposed moral rule is self-defeating
- Circumstances not important, not general case
Kantian Analysis II

- Carla submitted another person’s work
- She attempted to deceive her professor
- She treated professor as a means to an end
- Therefore, what Carla did was not ethical
- Circumstances are irrelevant, intent determines judgement
Case for Kantianism

- Rational
- Based on universal moral guidelines.. duty to do good and respect others
- Treats all persons as moral equals
Issues with Kantianism

- Sometimes no one rule adequately characterizes an action or situation.
- There may be no way to resolve rule conflicts.
- What are the appropriate rules(s)?
- Kantianism allows no exceptions to moral rules.
Utilitarianism

• Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
• An action is good to extent that it benefits someone
• An action is bad to extent that it harms someone

• Outcomes most important ... Consequentialism
good will or intention of no concern
Utilitarianism

• Utility: tendency of an object to produce happiness or prevent unhappiness for an individual or community

• Happiness = advantage = benefit = good = pleasure

• Unhappiness = disadvantage = cost = harm = pain
Utilitarianism

• Methodology
  • identify stakeholders (those impacted)
  • identify impacts of act on stakeholders
  • evaluate overall impact by combining
Highway Routing Scenario

- State wants to replace a stretch of highway
- New highway segment less curves
  - 2 miles shorter, more traffic capacity
- 200 houses would have to be removed
- Some wildlife habitat would be destroyed
Highway Routing Scenario

- stakeholders
  - home owners along proposed route
  - drivers that use the route
  - state agencies and tax payers
  - wildlife, environment
Case for Utilitarianism

- Focuses on happiness
- Down-to-earth (practical)
- Comprehensive, Rational
Problems with Utilitarianism

- Unclear whom to include as stakeholders
- Unclear the valuation of certain impacts
- Too much work for all decisions
- Ignores our sense of duties and rights
- Susceptible to the problem of moral luck
Bentham
Weighing Benefits/Costs

- Intensity, Duration, Certainty, Propinquity

To enact climate change regulations

Saturday, June 26, 2010
Social Contract Theory

• Jean-Jacques Rousseau
• In an ideal society, no one is above the rules
• That prevents society from enacting bad rules
• Societal rules designate rights for its members
• Ethical actions do not violate member rights
Kinds of Rights

- **Negative right**: A right that another can guarantee by leaving you alone to do something (right to vote)

- **Positive right**: A right obligating others to do something on your behalf (right to education)

- **Absolute right**: A right guaranteed without exception

- **Limited right**: A right that may be restricted based on the circumstances
DVD Rental Scenario

- Bill owns online DVD rental business (ala Netflix)
- Collects information about rentals from customers
- Constructs profiles of customers
- Sells profiles to other online marketing firms
Social Contract Analysis

- Consider rights of Bill, customers, and other companies.
- Does customer have right to expect name, address to be kept confidential?
- If customer rents DVD from Bill, who owns the information about transaction?
- Ownership determines rights in this case.
Social Contract Analysis

- If Bill and customer have equal rights to information, Bill did nothing wrong to sell information.

- If customer gives limited right to information only for completion of rental transaction, then Bill was wrong.
Case for Social Contract Theory

- Framed in language of rights
- Explains why people can act in self-interest ... they have the right to so act
- Provides clear analysis of certain citizen/government problems
Issues With Social Contract Theory

• No signed contract, disagreement on rights
• Laws are used to codify certain rights
• User agreements like contracts
• Some actions have multiple characterizations
• Conflicting rights problem
Eastern Ethical Theories

- Confucianism
- Taoism
- Buddhism

Forms of Virtue Ethics
Confucianism

- Honesty, truthfulness, faithfulness, reverence
- Respect for knowledge of ancestors and elders
- Importance of duty to one’s community, respect existing hierarchy
- Golden Rule
  - What one does not wish for oneself, one ought not to do to anyone else; what one recognizes as desirable for oneself, one ought to be willing to grant to others.
Confucianism

• respect for relationships is key factor
• acting for social benevolence and harmony an important ethical consideration
• personal rights not as important
  • differs from Western “barbarism”, based on respect for personal power
Confucianism

- Case Studies
  - Carla
    - don’t want someone to deceive you
  - Highway
    - societal usefulness of new road
T(D)aoism

- Selfless, helping
- Simplicity, moderation
- No strict guidelines, situational
- Respecting (being part of) flow of nature.. Tao
- Balancing opposites, futility of purity, yin-yang
- Loyalty to others and country
Buddhism

• Interdependence
  • any action result of countless factors

• Agent responsibility for
  intention, action, consequences. karma

• Reducing universal suffering is primary goal
  • ignorance, attachment, aversion
  • wisdom, generosity, compassion

• Universal non-violence
Virtue Ethics

• Happiness comes from living a life of virtue

• Virtue is developed by repeating appropriate acts

  • Deriving pleasure from a virtuous act is a sign that the virtue has been acquired

• Some virtues:

  • benevolence, courage, fairness, generosity, honesty, loyalty, patience, tolerance
Strengths of Virtue Ethics

• Provides motivation for good behavior
  • virtue is about right intention
  • outcomes, somewhat unpredictable, are secondary
Virtue Ethics

• A potential complement to utilitarianism
• Allows rationale for action to be considered
• Solves problem of moral luck of utilitarianism
Issues With Virtue Ethics

- No methodology for answering some problems
- Given a problem, which virtues apply?
- How to resolve a conflict between more than one virtue?
- Virtues are general, always not clear how
Virtue Contrast

Western Enlightenment values, such as liberty, rights consciousness, due process of law, instrumental rationality, privacy, and individualism, are all universalizable modern values. But the Confucian example suggests humanistic values, such as sympathy, distributive justice, duty consciousness, ritual, public spiritedness, and group orientation, that are also universalizable modern values. China/East Asia has to struggle to be more hospitable to human rights—liberties, equalities, or such ideas. Meanwhile, American/Western way of life must better consider values of distributive justice, sympathy, duty consciousness, and ritual.
General Procedure for Ethical Analysis

- Step 1: Situation Clarification
  - clarify the facts
  - clarify stakeholders
General Procedure for Ethical Analysis

- Step 2: Identify the Question
  - understand ethical questions/issues
  - Should who do what (to whom)?
General Procedure for Ethical Analysis

- Step 3: Pretheoretical Analysis
  - Legal consideration
  - Religious consideration
  - Cultural consideration
General Procedure for Ethical Analysis

• Step 4: Ethical Theory-based Analysis
  • Western
    • Kant, Utilitarianism, Social Contract
  • Eastern
    • Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism
General Procedure for Ethical Analysis

- Step 5: Decision and Implementation
  - decide on an ethical course of action
  - implement that action
Scenario I

- Anti-Spam is a group dedicated to reducing spam and maintains a blacklist of ISOP’s known to host spam.
- Urges a country where spam is hosted to stop it.
- When nothing done, puts country’s ISPs on a blacklist.
- Many other ISPs use blacklist to filter emails, stopping most emails from that country.
- Spam drops by more than 25% at the enforcing ISPs.
Scenario 1

• Should Anti-Spam have posted the country’s ISPs on its blacklist?

• Should the other ISPs refuse to accept email from the blacklisted ISPs?

• Could Anti-Spam achieve its goals through a better course of action?
Scenario 2

- State Police install web cameras connected to speed guns on all freeway overpasses
- Software can read license plates and match drivers faces to owner images on license
- Automatically issues speeding tickets
- Speeding is greatly reduced on freeways
- Used to capture anti-government activists.
Scenario 2

• Should the State Police be able to put up video surveillance cameras to reduce speeding?

• Should they also be able to use system to capture anti-government activists?