

Social Implications of a Computerized Society

A Crash Course in Ethics

Chapter 1.4

Instructor: Oliver Schulte

Simon Fraser University

Outline

- What is Ethics?
- Fundamental Ethical Principles
- Useful Ethical Distinctions
- Applications to
 - Privacy
 - Ad-blocking

Introduction

What is ethics?

Scope and Goals

- Ethics is the study of how to live a good life
- Especially a morally good or **virtuous** life
- 3000 years old, Ancient Greece, Rome

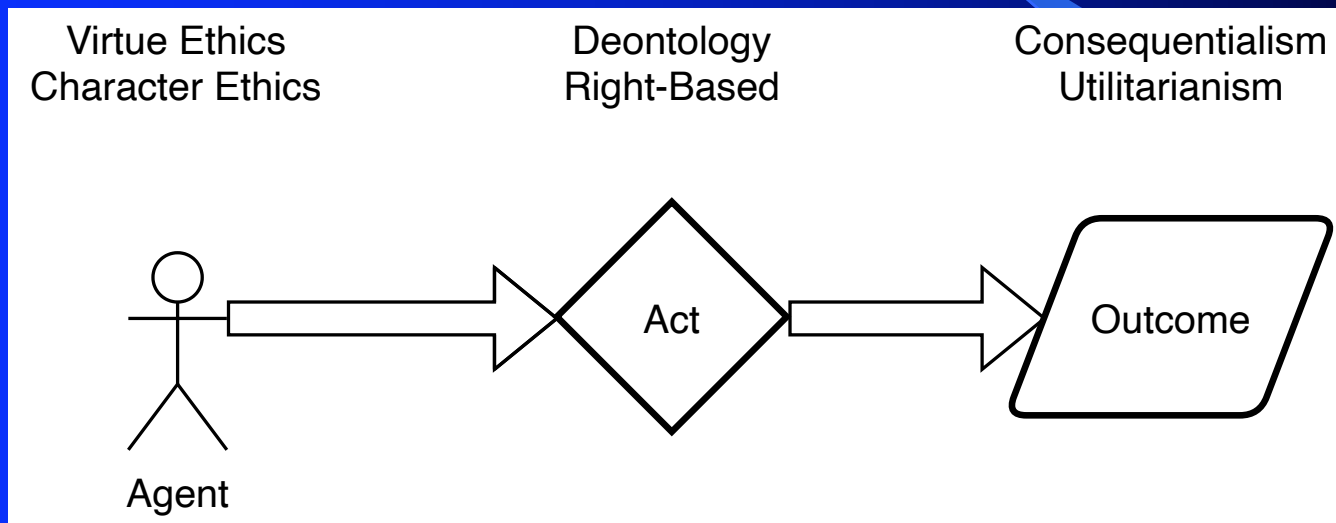
Goals

- Ethical principles
 - explain and evaluate intuitions (gut feelings)
 - help to make decisions
 - understand and resolve differences
- But: no algorithm, judgement calls are still necessary and conflicts remain

Fundamental Ethical Principles

- These principles cover many of our intuitions about why an action is right or wrong.
- Universalizability: what if everybody did this?
- Consequentialism (Utilitarianism): What are the consequences of my actions? Am I causing harm or happiness?
- Deontology: is my action right or wrong in itself?
- Fairness: Is everybody treated equally? No favours nor discrimination?
- Unfortunately, these powerful principles sometimes contradict each other → ethical dilemmas.

Three Aspects of Actions



Ethical Principles

The background is a solid blue gradient. A thin, light blue curved line starts from the top left and arcs towards the right. A larger, light blue triangle is positioned on the right side, pointing towards the center.

Universalizability

Universalizability

- What if everybody acted like you? What if we treated everybody like this?
 - E.g., what if everybody litters the park?
- The **Golden Rule** (Jesus, Buddha, Confucius): Treat others as you want to be treated.
- Kant's **categorical imperative** (my version): Act such that the principle of your action could be adopted by everyone in society.
 - “It's a question of principle/precedence”.

Privacy Example

- A woman enjoyed the feature on a social network site that told her which members read her profile, but she was surprised and upset to find that people whose profiles she read knew that she read them.
- What does universalizability say about this?





Utilitarianism

Consequentialist approaches

Consequentialism

- A selfish agent does what is best for her or himself
- Individual interest = pleasures – pain = individual **utility**
- A moral agent does what is best for **everybody**
- community interest = sum of individual utilities
- The ends justify the means

Social Choice

Options					Community
A&W	5	-5	0	0	0
Chef Hung	40	-10	5	-5	30
Nester's	-5	0	-2	1	-6

Going to Chef Hung produces the greatest overall happiness

Kill to be Kind (?)

- It's 1942 and a utilitarian is alone in a room with Hitler. She's got a gun and he doesn't.
- As a good utilitarian, would she kill him or not? Would you?

Options	You	Hitler	Rest of the World	Total
Shoot	100	-1000	100,000	99,100
Don't Shoot	-100	0	-100,000	-100,100

Exercise

- Housing Market Exercise
- Consider a society with 70% home ownership (roughly Canada)
- For simplicity, suppose that everybody over 30 owns a home and nobody under 30 does.
- The government is considering a law to bring down housing prices.
 - Makes housing more affordable for young people
 - Reduces the wealth of older people
- Would a utilitarian favour the law? Why or why not?

Discussion Question

- What would a utilitarian say about the importance of informed consent?
- Opt-in vs. opt-out policies?

Deontic approaches

Deontic approaches to morality

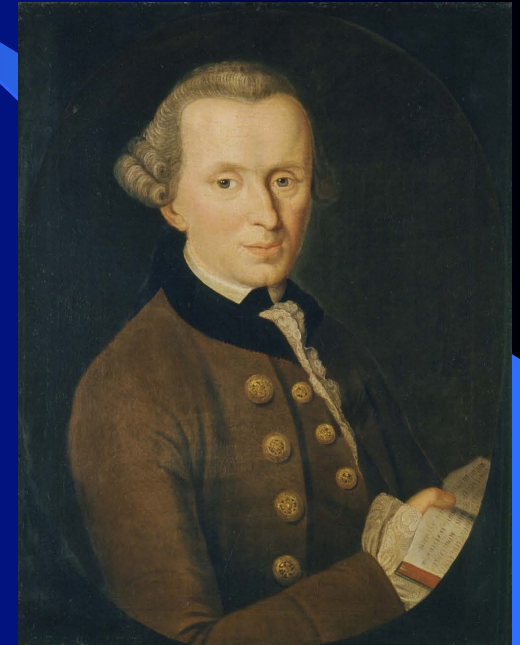
- “duty-based” ethics, from Greek: δέον (*deon*) meaning 'obligation' or 'duty'.
- Some acts are intrinsically right or wrong, regardless of consequences.
- E.g., it is wrong to kill.
- Often associated with basic rights, e.g. freedom of speech, freedom from discrimination, right to choose one's gender (?)

The Ten Commandments: Example of Deontic Morality

- Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.
- You shall not murder.
- You shall not commit adultery.
- You shall not steal.
- You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour.
- You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's spouse, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.

Kant: Deontic morality

- Our reason can tell us what is right and wrong
 - Using the categorical imperative
- “We must always treat another person as a end, not a means.”



Fairness

- We are very sensitive to just distributions of goods
 - So are monkeys
- How to distribute 6 chocolates? Some possible principles:
- Equality: everybody receives the same
- Need: everybody receives what they need
- Merit/Equity: everybody receives according to what they contributed
- These come up in the debate on CEO pay and pay ratios
 - New Canadian data

Exercise

- Housing Market Exercise
- Consider a society with 70% home ownership (roughly Canada)
- For simplicity, suppose that everybody over 30 owns a home and nobody under 30 does.
- The government is considering a law to bring down housing prices.
- Would the law be favourable from a deontology/universizability perspective?
- Would the law be favourable from a fairness perspective?

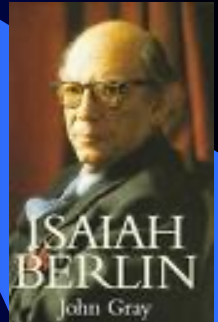
Ethical distinctions

Right, Wrong, Okay

- “Between ‘can do’ and ‘may do’ ought to exist the whole realm which recognizes the sway of duty, fairness, sympathy, taste, and all the other things that make life beautiful and society possible.” Lord Moulton 1912
- Ethics gives constraints on actions/laws (may do)
- Leaves room for personal preference – “there’s no disputing tastes”.

Positive and Negative Rights

- Isiah Berlin (1958)
“Two Concepts of Liberty”.
- **Negative Rights:** Right or freedom to act without interference.
 - Example: freedom of speech, freedom of assembly.
- **Positive Rights:** aka Claim-rights, entitlements.
 - Example: positive right to education, health care, shelter
- Related Concept: 1st person right (negative) vs. 3rd person right (positive)



Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

- “Everyone has the following fundamental freedoms:
 - (a) freedom of conscience and religion;
 - (b) freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication;
 - (c) freedom of peaceful assembly; and
 - (d) freedom of association.”

Are these positive or negative rights? Discuss with your neighbour.

UN Declaration of Child Rights

- “Principle 2 The child shall enjoy special protection, and shall be given opportunities and facilities, by law and by other means, to enable him to develop physically, mentally, morally, spiritually and socially in a healthy and normal manner and in conditions of freedom and dignity.
- Principle 3 The child shall be entitled from his birth to a name and nationality.
- Principle 4 The child shall enjoy the benefits of social security. He shall be entitled to grow and develop in health; to this end special care and protection shall be provided both to him and to his mother, including adequate prenatal and postnatal care. The child shall have the right to adequate nutrition, housing, recreation and medical services.”

Are these positive or negative rights? Discuss with your neighbour.

1st-person vs. 3rd-person preferences

- 1st person preferences: what I would like for **myself**.
 - E.g., what music I want to listen to.
- 3rd person preferences: what I would like for others (to do or to have).
 - E.g., what music I want to be played at the party.
- 1st person preferences carry more weight (in our society) because they express the **autonomy** of individuals.
- Distinction can be problematic:
 - E.g., you send me an email, and I want to forward it to a public mailing list. Is this a preference about **my** inbox (1st person) or **your** writing (3rd person)?

Privacy Examples

- Privacy International says that “privacy is a right, not a preference”.
- Which of the following privacy rights is a negative right and which a positive right?
 1. Permission to use anonymizing/encryption technology
 2. right to refuse requests for personal information
 3. right to stop others from communicating/sharing information about us

Case Study

the ethics of ad blocking

Ad-Blocking

- An estimated 144M users block ads
- Apple released mobile IOS that allowed apps to block ads
 - hundreds of thousands of users installed ad-blocking apps
- See class survey on ad-blockers

Responses

- The New York Times ran a message telling people about why they need ads to pay for content.
- 40% set their ad blocker to allow NYT ads.
- Facebook makes it difficult to block ads on a desktop.

Utilitarian Perspective

- Recall that a utilitarian weighs costs and benefits.
- What are some of the benefits of ad-blocking?
- What are some of the costs?

Benefits

- For users
 - Freedom from intrusion (increases privacy)
 - less commercialism
 - faster loading of web pages
 - increased security
 - July hack used Yahoo's ad network to infect millions of Yahoo visitors with malware.
- For software businesses: can sell ad-blocking apps

Costs

- For users:
 - may miss out on useful (targeted) ads
 - if enough people block ads, can lose out on free services (more below)
- For advertisers and content creators:
 - less income
 - fewer jobs

Universalizability

- What if everybody blocked ads?
- May lose free services, small publishers
- What if only a minority block ads
(currently around 26% in the U.S.)?
- Are they **free-riding** on the ad viewers?

Dynamics and Ethics

- A limitation of applying ethics to current technology is that the technology or the market may change. E.g.
- some ad-blockers allow ads that follow a common standard
- Alternative funding models arise:
 - subscription (Netflix, Spotify)
 - crowd-funding
- uncertainty is reason to let technology develop

Conclusion

- Ethical frameworks and principles help to
 - give reasons for intuitions
 - explain why reasonable people can disagree on ethics
 - see common patterns in different dilemmas

Conclusion (II)

- Major ethical frameworks and principles include
 - universalizability
 - utilitarianism (cost-benefit analysis)
 - fairness and distributive justice
 - deontology, rights-based
 - social contract (not covered)