

Ethics in IT

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Ethical Theories

- Objectives
 - What is an ethical theory?
 - Why are there more than one theory?
 - Moral relativism
 - Deontological theory
 - Consequentialism
 - Virtue Ethics
 - The role of analogy in ethics in IT

Why we make decisions

- Why do you do the job you do?
- Why are you following this degree programme?
- Why did you marry your spouse?
- What do you do if your favourite team is playing in Champions League final, and it's your spouse's birthday - s/he hates football and expects to be taken out for dinner?
- Can we measure happiness? Our own, other people's?

Why we make decisions

- Is every decision we make concerned with happiness only?
- Why do you pay taxes?
- Why didn't you push anyone under a bus/run over anyone on your way here?
- Do we 'obey' laws out of a sense of duty, or because of the consequences of not obeying them?

Why we make decisions

- What happens when there is a conflict?
 - Duty says 'don't infringe copyright' but what if the consequences are light, and breaking this particular law will make us happy?
 - Or if our happiness from committing a crime outweighs the pain of the consequences, even if we are caught?
 - Or if we can make more people happy by making a decision that would make us unhappy?
 - Or if we are faced with a choice between two evils?

Why we make decisions

- Do we make decisions because of the 'rewards'?
- Do we make decisions because 'that's what [someone we admire] would do?'
- Do we do things because they are the 'right thing to do'?
- Do we do things because we *believe* they are the right thing to do?

What is an Ethical Theory?

- An Ethical Theory is a theory about how we should live our life, and is meant to guide us when we try to decide what to do
- Of course, just like natural language, where we don't have to know a grammar to be able to understand and be understood - even if we're not grammatical - we don't 'study' ethics, so our decisions are likely to be based on a hodgepodge of different rationalisations

What is an Ethical Theory?

- However, in our *professional* lives, we can apply ethical theories to determine what course of action to take when faced with a dilemma - which will hopefully make us better professionals and treat others more fairly than we might otherwise do

Why more than one theory?

- Like organised religion, there does not appear to be overwhelming independent evidence such that everyone in the world agrees that one ethical theory is right and all the others are wrong
- Sometimes, personal preference, belief, or circumstance, will determine the ethical theory by which to abide
- **BE CONSISTENT!!!!**

Descriptive vs. Normative Ethics

- Descriptive: what people *do believe* to be right or wrong
 - Moral relativism
- Normative: what people *should believe* to be right or wrong
 - Consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics

Descriptive Ethics

- What do people believe and is their behaviour consistent with their beliefs?
- Why is capital punishment, abortion, euthanasia 'ethical'/legal in some countries but not in others?
- Why do people in countries where capital punishment is accepted object to 'death by stoning' in other countries?

Normative Ethics

- Deontology: an action is always right or always wrong
- Consequentialism: the consequences of an action, rather than the action itself, are right or wrong
- Virtue Ethics: the habits or behaviour that will lead a person to live a good life

Normative: Deontology

- Duty ethics: focus is on rightness or wrongness of the actions themselves
- Moral absolutism: if it is wrong to lie, then you must never lie, even if a murderer asks you for the location of his next victim!
- ‘Normal’ deontologists: sometimes, telling the truth is ‘intrinsically good’ but sometimes lying is ok, depending on the consequences (not to be confused with consequentialism)

Normative: Deontology

- The Divine Command: an action is right if God says it is right
- But people's motives are important too: if you don't kill people because God said so, then you are good, but if you don't kill people because you can't stand the sight of blood, then you are not good, even though the outcome is the same
- E.g., Descartes

Normative: Deontology

- Kant's Categorical Imperative
 - Act according to the maxim that you can will that it would become a universal law
 - People must be treated as an end in themselves, rather than a means to an end
 - Act as though you were a law-making member of a kingdom of ends
- The only thing that can be called good without qualification is *good will*

Normative: Deontology

- W. D. Ross's seven right making features of a moral action: Duties of...
 - Beneficence: help other people
 - Non-malevolence: avoid harming others
 - Justice: ensure people get what they deserve
 - Self-improvement
 - Reparation: recompense those you have acted wrongly towards
 - Gratitude: benefit people who have benefited us
 - Promise-keeping: including telling the truth

Normative: Deontology

- Common criticism:
 - Deontology does not prioritise rights and duties, so what to do if there is conflict?

Normative: Consequentialism

- An action is not right or wrong in itself, but depends on the consequences of the action
 - If telling the truth could get someone killed it is the wrong thing to do
 - Stealing from the rich to give to the poor is right
- Usually, under consequentialism the right action is the one that maximises pleasure and minimises pain
- But for whom?

Normative: Consequentialism

- <http://www.iep.utm.edu/c/conseque.htm>
- Utilitarianism
- Ethical egoism
- Altruism
- Rule consequentialism
- Negative consequentialism

Normative: Consequentialism

- Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill:
Utilitarianism
 - Maximises pleasure for all
 - The end justifies the means
 - An action that maximises the benefit of most, possibly causing the suffering of the few is right (democracy??)

Normative: Consequentialism

- Ethical egoism:
 - What maximises your own pleasure is best.
Disregard everyone else
 - Must remember to take a long term view!
- Ethical altruism:
 - The right action is the one that maximises everybody else's pleasure, regardless of the consequences for yourself
 - Live for others

Normative: Consequentialism

- Rule consequentialism:
 - Moral behaviour involves following certain rules, so choose rules that tend to have good consequences, even though sometimes they might have bad consequences (compare with deontology)
 - E.g., ‘achieve equality for the blind’ is a good rule, but should we achieve it by blinding everyone?

Normative: Consequentialism

- Negative consequentialism:
 - Rather than acting to maximise the good consequences for the majority, act to minimise the bad consequences

Normative: Consequentialism

- Common criticisms:
 - What constitutes pleasure and pain?
 - How to measure pleasure and pain?
 - Can we always predict the outcome?

Normative: Virtue Ethics

- Character, rather than rules or consequences, is the key element of ethical thinking
- Actions that promote excellence, virtue are good
- Sometimes need to use practical and moral wisdom to resolve conflict
- Will enable you to live a good life and flourish
- Live your life according to how a virtuous person (or role model) would live it

Normative: Virtue Ethics

- Common criticism:
 - Who decides what is virtuous?
 - Behaviour considered virtuous 1000 years ago is not necessarily considered virtuous today. How can something once considered morally right now be considered morally wrong? E.g., Holy Crusades? Galileo's imprisonment? Women's (lack of) rights?

Making Ethical Decisions

- Many different ethical frameworks:
 - Utilitarianism, Consequentialism, Egoism, Relativism, etc.
- Must argue consistently
- Must consider (from Reynolds, 2003):
 - Facts; stakeholders; consequences of your ethical decision; laws/guidelines/policies; different options
 - and then evaluate the results of your decision

The Role of Analogy

- Ethics in IT is a relatively new field that is compounded by rapid advances in technology
- Frequently, we cannot refer to a legal framework (because one doesn't exist), but we still need to decide how to act
- Using analogy permits us to think about the problem from another point of view, which we are familiar with, to help us reach a decision
- E.g., your DVD library rents out only region 1 or DVDs that are 'not for rental'...