Computer Ethics

Normative Ethics – Ethical Theories

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Overview (van de Poel and Royakkers 2011)

- **Ethical theories**
  - Relativism and absolutism
  - Consequentialist approaches: utilitarianism
  - Duty ethics: Kantian theory
  - Virtue ethics
  - Care ethics
Ethics and morality

- Ethics is the **systematic reflection** on what is moral.
- **Morality** is the whole of opinions, decisions, and actions with which people, individually or collectively, express what they think is **good** or **right**.
- **Systematic reflection** on morality increases our **ability** to cope with **moral problems** (also those related to technology).
- **Ethics** is not a manual with answers: it reflects on questions and arguments concerning the moral choices people can make.
- Ethics is a **process for searching** for the right kind of morality.
Descriptive and normative ethics

- **Descriptive ethics** is the branch of ethics describing existing morality, including customs and habits, opinions about good and evil, responsible and irresponsible behavior, and acceptable and unacceptable action.

- **Normative ethics** is the branch of ethics judging morality and trying to formulate normative recommendations about how to act or live.
  - Do the norms and values actually used conform to our ideas about how people should behave?
Judgments

- **Descriptive judgment** describes what is actually the case (the present), what was the case (the past), or what will be the case (the future)
  - They are true or false ("The Challenger met all safety standards of the time")
  - Role of science in determining the truth of descriptive judgments
- **Normative judgment** is about whether something is good or bad, desirable or undesirable, right or wrong
  - How the world should be instead of how it is
  - "The Challenger should never have been launched"
- To distinguish is not always easy
Values are lasting convictions or matters that people feel should be strived for **in general** and not just for themselves to be able to lead a **good life** or to realize a **fair society**

- "Liberté, égalité, fraternité": slogan not expressing a personal preference, but values felt to be of importance for everyone
Values: intrinsic and instrumental

- **Intrinsic** value: vale in and of itself
  - The value of money for Scrooge McDuck: he values money independently of what you he can do with money

- **Instrumental** value: something that is valuable in as far as it is a means to, or contributes to something else that is intrinsically good or value
  - The value of money for Mother Theresa: money as instrumental value to realize a higher end (helping the poors)
Privacy: intrinsic or instrumental value?

- Much debated in the literature of computer ethics
- Most common justification: privacy has instrumental value by offering us protection against harm
- (Johnson 2009): privacy should be regarded as an essential aspect of autonomy; autonomy is fundamental to what it means to be human, to our values as human beings
  - Privacy is a necessary condition for an intrinsic value: autonomy
  - The loss of privacy would be a threat to our most fundamental values
  - If a person is being watched by constant surveillance, this has an enormous effect on how the person behaves and how he or she sees himself or herself
Norms are **rules** that prescribe what **actions** are required, permitted, or forbidden.

Values are often translated into norms; **norms** are **means** to realize **values**

- Value of safety in a traffic system is mainly specified by the legal norms from the traffic regulations.
Certain type of human characteristics or qualities

**Moral virtues** (justice, honesty, courage, loyalty, creativity, ...) are desirable characteristics of people – those that make people good

**Intellectual virtues** focus on knowledge and skills

Many moral virtues are also values (integrity)
- But the notion of virtue mainly refers to the character development someone has to have gone through to truly realize those values

**Moral virtues** are **indispensable** in a responsible organization
- An organization can formulate nice values (integrity, respect) as much as it likes, but without the moral virtues being present in the character of its employees little will be accomplished
Theories in normative ethics
Normative relativism argues that all moral points of view – all values, norms, and virtues – are equally valid.

Problems: it seems to involve an inherent contradiction (there are no universal norms, but at the same time it uses a universal norm); it makes any meaningful moral discussion totally impossible.
Universalism and absolutism

- **Universalism** states that there is a system of norms and values that is *universally applicable* to everyone, independent of time, place, or culture.

- **Absolutism** is a rigid form of universalism in which no exceptions to rules are possible.
  - Difficult to work with a universal norm valid for all situations; no answer for conflicting norms; no room for independent moral judgment.
Utilitarianism

- Type of **consequentialism** (consequences of action are central to the moral judgment of those actions) based on utility principle
- Actions are judged by the amount of **pleasure** and **pain** they bring about
- The actions that bring the **greatest happiness** for the **greatest number** should be chosen (**maximization**)
Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

- **Hedonism** as the idea that ‘pleasure’ is the only thing that is good in itself and to which all other things are instrumental

- Utility principle for which one should choose those actions that result in the *greatest happiness* for the *greatest number*

- **Moral balance sheet** in which the *costs* and *benefits* for each possible action are weighted against each other
Historical roots: Stuart Mill

- John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)
  - **Freedom principle** (no harm principle) as the moral principle that everyone is free to strive for his/her pleasure, as long as they do not deny the pleasure of others
Criticism of utilitarianism

- Happiness cannot be measured objectively.
- Utilitarianism can lead to exploitation.
- Consequences cannot be foreseen objectively and often are unpredictable.
- Utilitarianism can lead to an unjust division of costs and benefits (against distributive justice).
- Utilitarianism ignores the personal relationships between people (only the total happiness counts).
- Certain actions are morally acceptable even if they do not create pleasure and some actions that maximize pleasure are morally unacceptable.
Duty ethics

- Also known as **deontological ethics**
- The class of approaches in ethics in which an **action** is considered **morally right** if it is in **agreement** with a certain **moral rule**
- These rules
  - can be given by **God** (such as in the Bible or the Koran)
  - make appeal to a **social contract** that the involved parties have implicitly agreed to (e.g., a company code)
  - are based on **reasonable arguments**
Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) rejects the idea that moral laws are based on happiness and proposes **duty**.

- **Categorical imperative** is a universal principle of the form “Do A” which is the **foundation** of all the moral judgments in Kant’s view.

- **Universality principle** is the first formulation of the categorical imperative:
  
  “Act only on that maxim which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”

- **Reciprocity principle** is the second formulation of the categorical imperative:

  “Act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end, never as a means only”
Equality and reciprocity

- **Free will** of all rational beings is the fundamental ground of human rights
  - **Equality postulate** as the prescription to treat persons as equals (with equal concern and respect)

- By stressing the **rational nature** of **humans** as free, intelligent, self-directing beings, Kant stresses that we must not merely use them as means to our selfish ends
  - To use people is to **disrespect their humanity**

- Ex.: to borrow money from someone by knowing that I will not be able to pay it back but while promising that I will do
If all moral laws can be derived from the categorical imperative, the question arises whether all these laws form an unambiguous and consistent system of norms.

- To save one friend by lying

A rigid adherence to moral rules can make people blind to the potentially very negative consequences of their actions.

- A case of child labor (more harm than good)
Prima facie norms (Ross 1930) are the applicable norms, unless they are overruled by other more important norms that become evident when we take everything into consideration (self-evident norms)

- The norm “children should not be forced into slavery or prostitution” would be the self-evident norm instead of “child labor is not permitted”
Virtue ethics

- It is an ethical theory that focuses on the nature of the acting person. This theory indicates which good or desirable characteristics people should have or develop to be moral
  - Aristotle (384-322 BC) and eudaimonia (the good life): a state of being in which one realizes one’s uniquely human potential (the state of being a good person)
  - Moral virtue is the middle course between two extremes of evil
  - Practical wisdom is the intellectual virtue enabling one to make the right choice of action and consisting in the ability to choose the right mean between two vices
- Virtue ethics does not give concrete clues about how to act while solving a case, but does facilitate responsible action
Care ethics

- An ethical theory that emphasizes the **importance** of **relationships**, and which holds that the development of moral does not come about by learning general moral principles (Gilligan 1982)

- It focuses attention on the **living** and **experienced reality** of people in which mutual relationships can be viewed from different perspectives
  - People’s abilities and limitations impact moral decision-making

- Care ethics is criticized for being **philosophically vague**
  - What does care exactly entail?
An approach to ethics of engineering focusing on the **social arrangements** in engineering rather than on individual decisions

**Engineers** are **not the only ones** who are responsible for the development and consequences of technology

- **Developers and producers of technology** (engineering companies, industrial laboratories, consulting firms, universities, research centers)
- **Users** who use the technology and may formulate certain wishes or requirements for the functioning of a technology (both **companies** and **citizens**)
- **Regulators** (organizations) who formulate rules or regulations that engineering products have to meet (rulings concerning health and safety, but also linked to relations between competitors)
- Others such as professional associations, educational institutes, interest groups and trade unions
Applied ethics

- **Applied ethics** is not the **application** of **moral principles** or theories to **particulars situations**
  - No moral theory is generally accepted (and even if it were one it could be not easy to apply it to particular cases)
  - Theory development in ethics does not take place independent of particular cases; rather is an attempt to systematize particular cases

- Role of applied ethics in **discovering** the **ethical aspects** of a problem or a situation
  - Different ethical theories stress different aspects of a situation
  - Ethical theories also suggest certain **arguments** that can play a role in moral judgments
References