

CSE/ISE 312

Ethics

Do the Right Thing

What is Ethics

- Study of what it means to “do the right thing”
- Ethical theory assumes that people are rational and make free choices
- Ethical rules are rules to follow in our interactions and our actions that affect others
 - Most attempt to enhance human dignity, peace, happiness, and well-being

Ethical Views (1)

Deontological (nonconsequentialist) theories

- View acts as good or bad based on the intrinsic aspect of the action. Emphasize duty, absolute rules (e.g., do not lie)
- Three Immanuel Kant's ideas about ethics:
 - Principle of universality: we should follow rules of behavior that we can universally apply to everyone
 - Logic and reason determines rules of ethical behavior. One should use reason, rationality, and judgment, not emotions, when making ethical decisions
 - Never treat people as merely means to ends, but rather as ends in themselves

Ethical Views (2)

Utilitarianism (a consequentialist theory)

- Consider consequences, aim to increase happiness, or net aggregate utility;
 - Utility: what satisfies a person's needs and values
 - Aggregate utility: consider all affected people
- an act is right if it increases aggregate utility
- Distinguish act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism
 - Act: Consider utility of each act
 - Rule: Consider utility of general ethic rules instead, not individual act

Ethical Views (3)

Natural rights

Try let people make their own decisions, act freely according to their own judgment

- Ethical behaviors respect fundamental/natural rights including rights to life, liberty, and property
- Acts are likely ethical if they involve voluntary interactions and freely made exchanges, where the parties are not coerced or deceived
 - Emphasize the process by which people interact, not the result of the interaction

Negative rights vs. Positive rights

- Negative rights (liberties)
 - The rights to act without interference
- Positive rights (claim-rights)
 - An obligation of some people to provide certain things for others, such as work, food, medical care, etc.
- Negative rights and positive rights often conflict
 - Some think protecting claim rights is essential, some think protecting liberties is essential

Negative rights vs. Positive rights

- Negative rights (liberties)
 - Right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness
 - Right to freedom of speech and religion
 - Right to work, own property, access the Internet
- Positive rights (claim-rights)
 - To life: someone is obligated to pay for food/medical care
 - To freedom of speech
 - To a job: someone must hire you
 - To access Internet: subsidized access for poor people

Ethical Views (4)

Golden rules

- Do unto others as you would have them do unto you
- When making an ethical choice, consider from the perspective of the people the choice affects
- We want people to recognize us as individuals and to respect our choices. Thus we should respect theirs

No simple answers

- Ethical theories do not provide clear, incontrovertibly correct positions on most issues
- But they help to identify things to consider, help to clarify reasoning and values

Important Distinctions (1)

- Right, wrong and okay
 - It may be misleading to divide all acts into right and wrong
 - Better to use ethically obligatory/prohibited/acceptable
- Difference between wrong and harm
 - Carelessly and needlessly causing harm is wrong
 - Harm alone is not sufficient to be unethical
 - Lack of harm is not sufficient to be ethical

Important Distinctions (2)

- Separating goals from constraints
 - Goals is one thing, constraints on actions that are used to achieve goals is another thing
 - Business' goal to maximize profits is not unethical, but how to achieve the goal has ethical constraints
- Personal preference and ethics
 - Try to distinguish between acts we find distasteful, rude, or ill-advised and acts that we can argue convincingly are ethically wrong

Important Distinctions (3)

- Law and Ethics
 - Some laws enforce ethical rules, some partly, some don't (e.g., politicians pass laws to benefit themselves)
 - Are we ethically obligated to obey a law?
 - Is it always ethically right to do that which is legal?
No!
 - New law lags behind new technology. Ethics fills the gap in between