

# INTRODUCTION TO ETHICS AND RIGHTS

**Ethics:** A philosophical system for determining ‘right’ from ‘wrong’, ‘good’ from ‘evil’.

Ethics is formalized morality.

## **Ethics versus legal:**

“Ethics” is a part of philosophy. One hopes that ethics would form the underpinning of any laws.

“Legal” is a system of laws, created by authority and enforced on persons subject to that authority. In a law-making system, what systems are place for checking a proposed law against ethics?

Earl Warren (SCOTUS, Chief Justice): *Society would come to grief without ethics, which is unenforceable in the courts, and cannot be made part of the law.*

## **Ethical responsibilities of citizens:**

1. Obey the laws, unless the law conflicts with belief system.

(!!!??? Why the exception? What if the belief system requires honor-killing? )

2. Do no intentional harm to another.

(!!!???,

What is harm? (e.g., can you play to win in any competition where the opposing person cares about winning?)

Who is another? A pet? A dog killing your sheep? A person intent on murder?

What about accidental harm? (e.g., you work at a peanut-packing plant and you walk past someone who is intensely allergic)

What about something that is not really ‘harm’ (e.g., you see George Soros accidentally drop a quarter. Should you pick it up and return it, or pick it up and keep it?. Suppose he’s 20 feet away, surrounded by surly body-guards, and you have a broken foot?)

3. Others ... ?

## **(Additional) Ethical responsibilities of computer professionals:**

1. Software Engineering Code of Ethics: <http://www.acm.org/about/se-code>

2. ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibility:

<http://www.acm.org/about/code-of-ethics>

3. IEEE Code of Ethics: <http://www.ieee.org/web/aboutus/ethics/code.html>

## **Models of Ethics (ethical theory)**

Ethical theories give a structured way of addressing ethical questions (is it right or is it wrong). Different ethical models may give different answers to the same question.

**1. Relativism (subjective** - each person decides; **cultural** - a culture, group, ... during a specified time, hold a common agreement on right versus wrong)

Brief description: There are no universal moral norms of right and wrong. Different individuals or different groups can hold opposite positions, and both are correct.

Problem with relativism: We have to live with each other.

## **2. Divine command**

The decision has already been made by external force (e.g., a deity), and we need only interpret the decision.

Problem with divine command:

We disagree on the deity.

We disagree on the interpretation of the deity's will

## **3. Utilitarianism: ("the ends justify the means" -- The important thing is the consequence of the act, not the act itself)**

**Act Utilitarianism:** An action is right (or wrong) to the extent that it increases (or decreases) the total happiness of the affected parties.

It's a complicated calculation for each moral decision:

Who are 'affected parties'?

What is 'happiness' for each party?

**Rule utilitarianism:** adopt those rules that lead to greatest increase in total happiness. This has similar calculations as Act Utilitarianism, but the decision leads to a rule, rather than a case-by-case (act-by-act) recalculation.

- \* What comprises "happiness"
- \* intensity: magnitude of the experience
- \* duration: how long the experience lasts
- \* certainty: probability it will happen
- \* propinquity: how close it is in space and time
- \* fecundity: its ability to create more experiences of the same kind
- \* purity: extent to which happiness is not diluted by pain
- \* extent: number of people affected

Problems with utilitarianism:

one scale to evaluate completely different kinds of consequences

unjust distribution of happiness is ignored

## **4. Kantianism (Categorical imperative): ("the means justify the ends" -- the important thing is the act)**

Two formulations

- a. treat humanity in oneself and others always as an end and never merely as a means,

Theft is wrong (see wikipedia article). No person can consent to theft (because if he consented, it wouldn't be theft).

Since victim cannot consent, the victim is a means and not an end to the theft.

b. act only on a maxim which could will to be a universal law.

Intent to deceive is wrong (see wikipedia article). I make a promise with the intention of renegeing on it. Suppose everyone made promises with intention of renegeing. There is a logical contradiction centering on the definition of "promise." Hence it is wrong to promise without intending to satisfy the promise.

Problem with Categorical imperative

No way to resolve conflict between rules: e.g., rules are "do not steal", and "protect lives of the innocent". Now suppose your children are starving.

No way to 'bend' the rule. Your wife asks "don't you just love my new haircut?" And actually you hate the new haircut. Truth with consequences, or lie with no consequences but a bending of the rule "do not lie".

**Consider these situations from different ethical models.**

1. Determine a model which best supports that the act is good (be specific, e.g., if you use authority, specify the authority)

2. Determine a model which best supports that the act is bad (be specific....)

*A. Slavery, involuntary - e.g., captured prisoners of war*

*B. Slavery, voluntary - e.g., to pay off debt*

*C. Situation (from Quinn)*

In August 2003, the Blaster worm infected many computers by exploiting a certain security hole. The worm caused computers it infected to reboot every few minutes. Soon, another worm, Nachi, was exploiting the same security hole and spreading through the Internet. If a computer was immune to Blaster, it was also immune to Nachi. If Nachi gained access to a computer through the security hole, it located and destroyed copies of Blaster on the computer. It also automatically downloaded a patch to the OS that fixed the hole. Finally, it used the computer as a launching pad to seek out other computers.

Was the person who released Nachi right or wrong?

## **Rights**

Virginia Declaration of Rights (June 12, 1776) *That all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, of which, when they enter into a state of society, they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety.*

Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776): *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.*

Bill of Rights (Amendments to the US Constitution)

I. *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*

**One way of looking at ‘rights’ is how they form a relationship between the rights-holder and others:**

*Positive right specifies a duty on others to supply the right.*

*Negative right specifies that others must leave you alone to exercise your right.*

**Negative right, positive right?**

- Freedom to peaceably assemble
- Prayer in school
- Health care

**Consider the following in the context of negative/positive rights. Who are the parties involved?**

- Voluntary slavery
- Copy your lecture notes for a friend
- Plagiarism
- Rip a song from a CD (you purchased) onto your MP3 player.