

**Week 10**

***Ethics and  
Morality***



# Ethics

Ethics refers to standards of conduct, standards that indicate how one should behave based on moral duties and virtues, which themselves are derived from principles of right and wrong.

# Moral Relativism

Values are determined by the society we grow up in, and there are no universal values. Moral values are simply customs or conventions that vary from culture to culture.

# Moral Consistency

To what extent do you think the following individuals are morally inconsistent?

- A. an anti-abortionist who supports the death penalty
- B. a vegetarian who buys leather shoes
- C. a socialist who educates his children at a private school
- D. A politician who advocates family values and has an affair
- E. An environmental activist who drives an SUV
- F. Someone who thinks stealing is wrong but makes illegal copies of computer software or music.

# How do I know what to do?

Can you choose three values which are universal for all humans? Why do you think so?

We have clearly made scientific progress over the last three hundred years. Does it also make sense that we have made moral progress?

Are serial killers “bad” or “mad”

Are people basically good, and corrupted by society, or are people basically bad and must be kept in line by society?

Imagine that you arrive in a “democratic” country in which adult women have the vote but men have no political power. When you interview them, the men tell you that they are quite happy with the situation, that public life is for women, and a man’s place is in the home. To what extent would you accept the situation, and to what extent would you try to “re-educate” the men and make them see the extent to which they have been indoctrinated?

# Self Interest Theory

Human beings are always and everywhere selfish. Even if there are objective moral values, we are incapable of living up to them.

- ‡ Definitional argument – we are selfish when we do what we want to do, and we always do what we want to do.
- ‡ Evolutionary argument – humans are naturally selfish - programmed (biologically) to survive.
- ‡ Hidden benefits argument – selfish benefits to helping others.
- ‡ Fear of punishment argument – what if I get caught? (Ring of Gyges).

# Consider This...

*Are people basically good, and corrupted by society, or are people basically bad and must be kept in line by society?*

# Theories of Ethics

While it may be that some values are relative and that people are often selfish, we do not have to conclude that all values are relative or that people are always selfish. An ethical theory attempts to provide a set of fundamental moral principles in harmony with our moral intuitions.

**Religious Ethics** – an authoritative rule book to tell us what rules to follow.

**Duty Ethics** - Fulfill your obligations. Duties and rights are two sides of the same coin.

**Utilitarianism** – There is one and only one supreme moral principal – that we should seek the greatest happiness of the greatest number. Maximize happiness. Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (1800).

**Kant's Approach To Ethics** – Can your actions be consistently generalized? Ask yourself “What if everyone did that?”. According to Kant, if something is wrong, it is always wrong!



# Duty Ethics

Duties and rights are two sides of the same coin.

Choose 2 rights from the UN Declaration of Human Rights and rewrite these to describe a human “duty”.

# Utilitarianism

We care about morality because we care about human happiness

What do you think is the relationship between pleasure and happiness? Is happiness just the sum of pleasures, or can you have many pleasures and still be unhappy?

Are the richest nations of the world home to the happiest people in the world?

According to Bertrand Russell (1872-1970), "To be without some of the things you want is an indispensable part of happiness." What did he mean? Do you agree?

# Kant's Approach to Ethics

In Kant's view, happiness does not equal morality. Only a good will has ultimate moral value. Moral rules should be universal.

- Special pleading – rationalizing to ourselves
- The golden rule - treat others the way you wish to be treated
- Veil of ignorance - imagine the situation from both points of view

# Which of the following is a special case that justifies breaking a generally accepted rule?

1a. You should respect the highway code, but it is ok to drive through a red light if you are late for work.

1b. You should respect the highway code, but it is ok to drive through a red light if you are taking a critically ill person to the hospital.

2a. You should keep your word, but it is ok to break a social engagement if something more interesting comes up.

2b. You should keep your word, but it is ok to break a social engagement if you have just contracted an infectious disease.

3a. You should pay your taxes, but it is ok not to pay them if you are short of money that year.

3b. You should pay your taxes, but it is ok not to pay them if they are being spent on a nuclear arms program.

4a. Murder is wrong, but it would have been ok to assassinate Hitler in 1942.

4b. Murder is wrong, but it would be OK to kill someone planning a terrorist attack.

# Ethical Dilemmas

An elderly woman living alone in poor circumstances with few friends or relatives is dying, and you, her friend, are at her bedside. She draws your attention to a small case under her bed, which contains some mementos along with the money she has managed to save over the years, despite her apparent poverty. She asks you to take the case and to promise to deliver its contents, after she dies, to her nephew living in another state. Moved by her plight and by your affection for her, you promise to do as she requests. After a tearful goodbye, you take the case and leave. A few weeks later the old woman dies, and when you open the case, you discover that it contains \$500,000 dollars. No one else knows about the money, or the promise you made. You learn that the nephew is a compulsive gambler and has a drug addiction.

What would Kant say you should do?

What would John Stuart Mill say you should do?

What would you do? Why?

# Ethical Dilemmas

Suppose you are a famous anthropologist. One day you find a remote tribe in the middle of the Amazon rain forest. The tribe is really surprised by your visit. After all, you are the first stranger they have ever seen. The tribe is just in the middle of a religious ritual. They are preparing to execute 20 prisoners from a neighboring tribe as a gift to the sun god. However, since they also want to honor you, they offer you the honor of strangling one of the prisoners with your own hands. If you do that they will let the others go back to their own tribe. If you refuse to accept this honor, they will sacrifice all 20 people. You try to tell them that your god does not allow you to strangle people, but the tribe leader is unwilling to make any deals. He is very clear, either you strangle one of the prisoners or else all 20 will be killed.

What would you do? Why?

# Kohlberg's Stages of Moral Development

Although it has been questioned as to whether it applied equally to different genders and different cultures, Kohlberg's (1973) stages of moral development is the most widely cited. It breaks our development of morality into three levels, each of which is divided further into two stages:

## **Preconventional Level (up to age nine): ~Self Focused Morality~**

1. Morality is defined as obeying rules and avoiding negative consequences. Children in this stage see rules set, typically by parents, as defining moral law.
2. That which satisfies the child's needs is seen as good and moral.

## **Conventional Level (age nine to adolescence): ~Other Focused Morality~**

3. Children begin to understand what is expected of them by their parents, teacher, etc. Morality is seen as achieving these expectations.
4. Fulfilling obligations as well as following expectations are seen as moral law for children in this stage.

## **Postconventional Level (adulthood): ~Higher Focused Morality~**

5. As adults, we begin to understand that people have different opinions about morality and that rules and laws vary from group to group and culture to culture. Morality is seen as upholding the values of your group or culture.
6. Understanding your own personal beliefs allow adults to judge themselves and others based upon higher levels of morality. In this stage what is right and wrong is based upon the circumstances surrounding an action. Basics of morality are the foundation with independent thought playing an important role.

# Integrity

What is integrity?

What does integrity mean to you?

Do you aspire to be a virtuous person?

Has someone of high moral principles been an inspiration to you?



# Reflection - Integrity

1. Have you had ethical dilemmas in your own life? How did you reason your way through them? What ethics theory best matches your approach?
2. What does integrity mean to you? Do you aspire to be a virtuous person? Has someone of high moral principles been an inspiration to you?