

# **ECS 188**

## **Ethics and the Information Age**

**Notes From Ermann & Shauf**  
**Chapters 1,2,4,5,7,8,9**

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[John Hospers] (1972)

# 1. The Best Action is the One with the Best Consequences

**Utilitarianism:** Our obligation is always to act so as to promote the greatest possible intrinsic good  
(which is understood to be *happiness* in the bulk of the article)

- Action must be voluntary.
- No preference for immediate reward
- Must consider all actions available
- Neither an *egoistic* ethics (you only care about your own happiness) nor an *altruistic* ethics (you only care about other people's happiness).
- People will disagree whether a given action X is the one that maximizes happiness—but utilitarianism always take the goal to be

# Rules Under Utilitarianism

- Rules like "don't kill" or "don't tell lies" are *on the whole* good, because they promote total happiness.
- But they're not sacred: if you believe you'd promote more happiness to break the rule, you should.
- You might believe that killing is *always* wrong. If so, you'd believe this because you felt that killing always brought about less happiness (or more unhappiness) than alternatives.

## Analyze from a Utilitarian Perspective:

- 100 sadists are attending a meeting (ISC 2004) in a lawless country. They would get enormous pleasure from torturing some hapless soul. They spot an unhappy homeless woman sleeping in an alley. Nobody would ever miss her. What should they do?
- I'm running late for an important meeting. If I drive the speed limit, 55, I'll get there 30 minutes late and my boss and a client will be very unhappy. If I go 70 I could just make it.

[James Rachels] (1986)

## 2. The Best Action is the One in Accord with Universal Rules

**Kantian theory:** Our obligation is always to act so as to promote the greatest possible intrinsic good (which is understood to be *happiness* in the bulk of the article)

- Human beings are fabulous, far better than anything else.
- Animals and everything else are to serve our means.

Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only. [Kant, 1785]

# What makes Humans Unique?

1. People have desires and goals. They have wants, so other (non-human) things have value to them. This is the *only* value that (non-human) things have.
2. People have an *intrinsic worth*, or *dignity* because they are *rational agents*—*free agents* capable of making their own decisions, setting goals, and guided by reason.

Treating others as ends and not means = respecting their nature as rational agents.

Ex: Lying to a friend about borrowing money I can't repay, money needed for some good purpose.

# Kant's View of Criminal Justice System

- Rational beings are responsible for their behavior, so they should be "held accountable" for what they do.
- Reward and punishment are the natural consequences of gratitude and resentment.
- The rational agent's conduct is what determines what happens to them; we are allowing he who does something to determine how he will be treated.

## 4. The ACM Code of Ethics (1992)

*As an ACM member and computing professional I will ....*

### 1.1 Contribute to society and human well-being.

...computing professionals must attempt to ensure that the products of their efforts will be used in socially responsible ways, will meet social needs, and will avoid harmful effects to health and welfare. ... [H]uman well-being includes a safe natural environment...

### 1.2 Avoid harm to others.

...it is often necessary to assess the social consequences of systems to project the likelihood of any serious harm to others. If system features are misrepresented ... the individual computing professional is responsible for any resulting injury...

### 1.3 Be honest and trustworthy.

[about what a system can do, about your own job qualifications]



## 1.4 Be fair and take action not to discriminate

...Inequities between different groups of people may result from the use or misuse of information and technology. In a fair society, all individuals would have equal opportunity to participate in, or benefit from, the use of computer resources regardless of race, sex, religion, age, disability, national origin or other such similar factors...

## 1.5 Honor property rights including copyrights and patents.

...Copies of software should be made only with proper authorization. Unauthorized duplication of materials must not be condoned.

## 1.6 Give proper credit for IP

## 1.7 Respect the privacy of others.

...taking precautions to ensure the accuracy of data, as well as protecting it from unauthorized access or accidental disclosure... only the necessary amount of personal information be collected in a system, that retention and disposal periods for that information be clearly defined and enforced, and that personal information gathered for a specific purpose not be used for other purposes without consent of the individual(s). These principles ... prohibit procedures that capture or monitor electronic user data ... without the permission of users or bona fide authorization related to system operation and maintenance. User data observed during the normal duties of system operation and maintenance must be treated with strictest confidentiality...

## 1.8 Honor confidentiality.

2.1 Strive to achieve the highest quality, effectiveness and dignity in both the process and products of professional work.

2.2 Acquire and maintain professional competence

2.3 Know and respect existing laws pertaining to professional work

...compliance must be balanced with the recognition that sometimes existing laws and rules may be immoral or inappropriate and, therefore, must be challenged. Violation of a law or regulation may be ethical when that law or rule has inadequate moral basis ...

2.4 Accept and provide appropriate professional review.

2.5 Give comprehensive and thorough evaluations of computer systems and their impacts, including analysis of possible risks.

## 2.6 Honor contracts, agreements, and assigned responsibilities.

when one contracts for work with another party, one has an obligation to keep that party properly informed about progress toward completing that work. A computing professional has a responsibility to request a change in any assignment that he or she feels cannot be completed as defined.

## 2.7 Improve public understanding of computing and its consequences.

...This imperative implies an obligation to counter any false views related to computing.

## 2.8 Access computing and communication resources only when authorized to do so.

...

# 5. Using the ACM Code

- Simplistic examples?

# 7. The Morality of Whistle Blowing

(Sissela Bok)

- Quite rare—Maybe harder than people imagine. Why?
- Which is harder, whistle-blowing or civil disobedience?
- “when whistle-blowers expose fraud in clinical research, colleagues respond *more* negatively to the whistle-blowers who report the fraudulent research than to the person whose conduct has been reported”; [Swazey, Scheer]

## 8. The Ethics of Systems Design (Human Agency and Responsible Computing)

Batya Friedmand and Peter Kahn

Humans are capable of being moral agents and that computational systems are not. This understanding can be distorted in two ways:

1. The system diminishes the users sense of his own moral agency. (Erodes human dignity and sense of responsibility.)
2. The system masquerades as an agent having human agency, projecting intentions or volition.

# 9. Are Hacker Break-ins Ethical?

Gene Spafford

Criticizes some common arguments:

A. "Information should be free"

B. Helps raise attention to security.

C. System is idle anyway.

D. I'm doing it for the educational value.

E. I'm trying to keep big-brother at bay.