

Kantianism

Lecture 2-2

Computers & Society (CPSC 430)

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Recap: Unworkable Ethical Theories

- What is an ethical theory?
- What do we mean by a workable theory?
- What does each unworkable theory consist of?
 - subjective relativism
 - cultural relativism
 - divine command

Ethical Egoism

“Surly looks out for one guy: Surly!”



- People’s self-interest is their only ethical obligation
- Morally right actions are those which advance one’s own long-term interests
- Helping others is moral only insofar as it advances one’s own interests
- Kernel of truth: better social outcomes can sometimes be achieved via people acting in their self interest than via central planning

Kantianism

- Key goal: derive morality from more basic principles
- Is anything good regardless of its consequences?
- Immanuel Kant: Only thing in the world that is good without qualification is a good will (desire to do the right thing)
 - other things we might call good (e.g., giving to charity) really depend on consequences
- Reason should cultivate desire to do right thing. Make this precise?



Categorical Imperative (1st Formulation)

Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws.

Illustration of 1st Formulation

- Question: Can a person in dire straits make a promise with the intention of breaking it later?
- Proposed rule: “I may make promises with the intention of later breaking them.”
- The person in trouble wants his promise to be believed so he can get what he needs.
- Universalize rule: Everyone may make & then break promises
- Everyone breaking promises would make promises unbelievable, contradicting desire to have promise believed
- The rule is flawed. The answer is “No.”

Categorical Imperative (2nd Formulation)

**Act so that you treat both yourself
and other people as ends in themselves
and never only as a means to an end.**

**“This is usually an easier formulation to work
with than the first formulation of the
Categorical Imperative.”**

*...but it depends critically on the “only”.
IMO, it’s “unworkable”.*

Second formulation follows from the first

From Wikipedia (“Categorical Imperative”):

*The free will is the source of all rational action. But to treat it as a [means to an end] is to deny the possibility of freedom in general. Because the autonomous will is the one and only source of moral action, **it would contradict the first formulation to claim that a person is merely a means to some other end, rather than always an end in themselves.***

Case for Kantianism

- Rational
- Produces universal moral guidelines
- Treats all people as moral equals

Perfect and Imperfect Duties

- Perfect duty: duty obliged to fulfill without exception
 - Examples: Telling the truth
- Imperfect duties are still duties that can be inferred by the application of “pure reason”: i.e., the first or second formulations of the categorical imperative. But they’re:
 - Activities you couldn’t keep doing forever; never “done”
 - Cause for praise if you do it; not cause for blame if you don’t.
- So what *are* imperfect duties?
 - Examples: helping others; developing your talents.
- More generally:
 - Furthering the ends of ourselves and others.
 - Not following maxims that lead to undesirable states of affairs (as distinct from logical contradictions) when universalized
- Not everything we think of as “good” is even an imperfect duty (e.g., doing my chores)

Case Against Kantianism

- Sometimes no rule adequately characterizes an action
- Sometimes there is no way to resolve a conflict between rules
 - In a conflict between a perfect duty and an imperfect duty, perfect duty prevails
 - In a conflict between two perfect duties, no solution
 - Doesn't allow for tradeoffs between moral imperatives
- Kantianism allows no exceptions to perfect duties
- Second formulation of the categorical imperative is really easy to misuse (as, indeed, is Kantianism in general)

Breakout Discussion: Mobile Surveillance

- “a special investigative team covertly infiltrates the mobile devices of Canadians. The tools, which have been used on at least 10 investigations between 2018 and 2020, give the police access to text messages, email, photos, videos, audio files, calendar entries and financial records. The software can also remotely turn on the camera and microphone of a suspect’s phone or laptop.”
- **Is it ethical for the Canadian government to use this system?** Consider from the perspective of Kantianism.



<https://bit.ly/3BJUvNX>

<https://theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/07/canada-police-spyware-admission-surveillance-experts>