
ETHC303

Ethical and Social Aspects of Computing

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Moral Systems, Ethical Concepts & Theories

Topics

1. Introduction to Moral System
2. Introduction to Ethical Theories

Morality

A society is an association of people organized under a system of rules.

Rules of conduct describe what people should and shouldn't do in various situations.

Rules are designed to advance the good of its people over time.

These rules are called **morality**.

Ethics is the “study of morality”

Morality is a system whose purpose is to prevent harm and evils in addition to aiming at promoting human flourishing.

Ethics is the philosophical study of morality, a rational examination into people’s moral belief and behaviour.

Ethics is the “study of morality”

Morality is a system of:

- **Rules of conduct** that guide human behavior
 - **Directives** (at micro level) for individual behavior
 - **Social policies** (at the macro level) for society
- **Principles** for evaluating the rules
 - Standards used to justify the rules e.g., justice, fairness, respect for others

Moral System

Rules of Conduct

(Action-guiding rules, in the form of either *directives* or social policies)

directives *social policies*

Rules for guiding the actions of *individuals* (micro-level ethical rules)

Examples include *directives* such as: "Do not steal" and "Do not harm others."

Rules for establishing *social policies* (macro-level ethical rules)

Examples include *social policies* such as: "Software should be protected" and "Privacy should be respected."

Principles of Evaluation

(Evaluative standards used to justify rules of conduct)

Examples include principles such as of justice, fairness, respect of others

Morality- Principles

When we talk about principles for morality or immorality we could be talking about

- ✓ fairness (co-operation without exploitation),
- ✓ loyalty (to our social groups),
- ✓ authority (understanding of position in a hierarchy)

Four features of a moral system

Public

The rules are known to all of the members.

Informal

The rules are informal, not like formal laws in a legal system.

Rational

The system is based on principles of logical reason accessible to all its members.

Impartial

The system is not partial to any one group or individual.

Four features of a moral system

- Gert describes a moral system as one that is **public**. The system is public, he argues, because **everyone must know what the rules are that define it.**
- Morality is also **informal** because a moral system has **no formal authoritative judges presiding over it.**
- A moral system is **rational** in that it is based on principles of logical reason accessible to ordinary persons. Morality **cannot involve special knowledge that can be understood only by privileged individuals or groups.**
- A moral system is **impartial** in the sense that the moral rules are ideally **designed to apply equitably to all participants in the system.**

Deriving and Justifying the Rules and Principles of a Moral System

rules of conduct for guiding actions in the moral system, whether individual directives or social policies are derived from certain core values.

Core values are the fundamental beliefs of a person or organization. They dictate behaviour and can help people understand the difference between right and wrong.

Deriving and Justifying the Rules and Principles of a Moral System

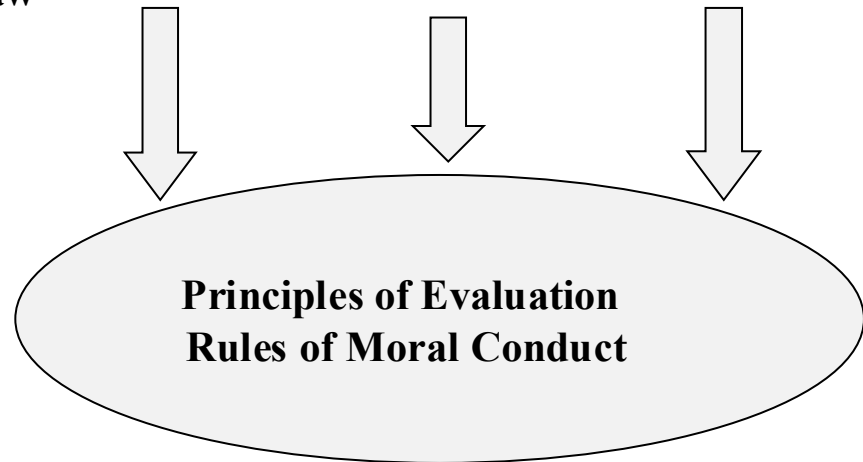
Principles for evaluating rules of conduct are typically grounded in one of three systems: *religion, law, or (philosophical) ethics.*

Components of a Moral System

Grounds for justifying moral principles



Moral principles and rules



Source of moral rules



Why we engage in philosophical/ethical analysis

- To critically evaluate arguments
- To support a position or claim.
- To convince someone to adopt or reject a certain position.
- To provide consistent (logical) reasons for our beliefs.
- To engage in meaningful dialogue.

What ethical theories have in common?

They identify what it means to “do the right thing”.

They assume that people have *free choice* to make their own rational decisions.

Their goal is generally to contribute to the well-being of humanity.

They distinguish obligations & responsibilities from choice & personal preference.

Ethical Principles: Four goals

Beneficence: The principle of beneficence guides the decision maker to do *what is right and good*. This priority to “do good” makes an ethical perspective and possible solution to an ethical dilemma acceptable.

Least Harm: least harm deals with situations in which no choice appears beneficial. In such cases, decision makers seek to choose to do the least harm possible and to do harm to the fewest people.

Ethical Principles

Respect for Autonomy: This principle states that decision making should focus on allowing people to be autonomous—to be able to make decisions that apply to their lives. Thus, people should have control over their lives as much as possible because they are the only people who completely understand their chosen type of lifestyle.

Justice: The justice ethical principle states that decision makers should focus on actions that are fair to those involved.

Types of ethical theories

The standard types of ethical theories:

- Ethical Relativism Theory
- Divine Command Theory
- Duty-based (Deontology)
- Consequence-based (Utilitarian) Theory
- Contract-based (Social contract) Theory
- Character-based (Virtue ethics) Theory

Ethical relativism Theory

Relativism is a theory which states that there are **no universal moral rules of right and wrong.**

According to this theory, different individuals or groups of people can have completely opposite views of a moral problem, and **both can be right.**

Ethical relativism Theory

This theory suggests that different environments produce different ethics:

- Historical times
- Countries
- Communities
- Families
- Individuals

Ethical Relativism Theory is of two types

- Subjective Relativism
- Cultural Relativism

Subjective Relativism

Ethical Subjective Relativism

Subjective relativism

Each person decides right and wrong for himself or herself: one person can say “X is right,” another can say “X is wrong,” **and both can be right**

Ethical Subjective Relativism

Subjective relativism is the view that **an action is morally right if one approves of it**. A person's approval makes the action right.

This doctrine (as well as cultural relativism) is in stark contrast to the view that some moral principles are valid for everyone.

Case for Subjective Relativism

- Subjective relativism implies that each person is morally dependable and that individuals can never have a genuine moral disagreement.

Case Against Subjective Relativism

- Blurs the distinction between doing what you think is right and doing what you want to do
- Makes no moral distinction between the actions of different people
- It allows people to make decisions based on something other than reason.
- Not a workable ethical theory: because it is based on the idea that each person decides for himself/herself what is right or wrong.

Cultural Relativism

Cultural Relativism in a Nutshell

Cultural relativism is the view that an action is morally right if one's culture approves of it.

The argument for this doctrine is based on the diversity of moral judgments among cultures: because people's judgments about right and wrong differ from culture to culture, right and wrong must be relative to culture, and there are no objective moral principles.

Cultural Relativism in a Nutshell

What is “right” and “wrong” depends upon a society’s actual moral guidelines. These guidelines vary from place to place and from time to time.

A particular action may be right in one society at one time and wrong in other society or at another time

Advantages of Cultural Relativism

1. It is a system which promotes cooperation and respect.
2. It creates a society where equality is possible.
3. It preserves human cultures
4. We can create personal moral codes based on societal standards with ease.

Disadvantages of Cultural Relativism

- 1. It creates a system that is fuelled by personal bias.**

When people are given the power to define their own moral code, then they will do so based on their own personal bias.

- 2. It would create chaos.**

People who can follow their own moral code because there is no “wrong” or “right” would be allowed to pursue any life they preferred under the theory of cultural relativism.

Disadvantages of Cultural Relativism

- 3. It is an idea that is based on the perfection of humanity**

which is not happening in real situations.

- 4. It could promote a lack of diversity**

We cannot create diversity when the emphasis of a society is individualistic gain that can come at the expense of others.

Is CR a workable theory?

- Not a workable ethical theory because it has significant weakness as a tool for ethical persuasion.
- It suggests that there are no universal moral guidelines.
- It gives tradition more weightage in ethical evaluation than reasons or facts.

Divine Command Theory

Divine Command Theory

- Divine command theory is an ethical view based on faith or the belief that God exists.
- Followers of the theory accept that all moral judgment is derived from an understanding of God's direct commandments. In other words, "what is in accordance with God's command is moral and what is contrary to that command is immoral" (Farnell, 2005).

Divine Command Theory

- Good actions are those aligned with God's will
- Bad actions are those contrary to God's will
- The holy books of each religion contain God's directions.
- Therefore, they can be used as guides to distinguish between morally good and bad actions and take moral decisions.

Advantages of Divine Command Theory

1. We owe obedience to our Creator. If you disobey God, you will be punished. If you follow his commands, you'll be rewarded.
2. God is all-good and all-knowing
3. God is the ultimate authority
4. God's commands set forth universal moral rules. The rules can be applied to anyone, at all times and places. The belief that God is eternal and never changes means that his commands are as relevant today as when they were first recorded.

Advantages of Divine Command Theory

5. God's commands don't depend on what others think are right or wrong. His commands are completely objective.
6. Religious texts allow us to know and understand the character of God, and they make it easier to know how to act morally.

Ethical Relativism Theory

Subjective relativism is the view that an action is morally right if one approves of it. A person's approval makes the action right.

Not a workable ethical theory: because it is based on the idea that each person decides for himself/herself what is right or wrong.

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