Ethical (Moral) Theories

We use ethical/moral theories to help us understand ethical cases and ethical problems that often face engineers.

A Moral theory defines terms in uniform ways and links ideas and problems together in consistent ways (Harris, Pritchard and Rabins)
Ethical (Moral) Theories

• They are not algorithms to resolve complex dilemmas.
• They can however, provide systematic guidance, understanding
• There are may approaches that can be applied to solving ethical issues.
• We can look at the problems from different “eyes”
• The opinions from these different “eyes” are based on a variety of ethical theories
In engineering, we deal with “applied” ethics. Others (philosophers) deal with “ethical” theories. We should have some knowledge of what these theories are because they assist us in solving engineering ethical problems.

It is most definitely not an academic exercise!!!
Ethical Theories

- Virtue Ethics
- Duty Ethics
- Right Ethics
- Utilitarianism
- Others
  - Divine Command Ethics
  - Ethical Egoism
  - Ethical Relativism
  - Ethical Pluralism
Virtue Ethics

• Oldest theory, started with Aristotle

• Assumes ethical behavior follows from characteristics/traits that people acquire.

• People will do the right thing because they have developed virtuous habits.

• Considered wisdom and good judgment the most important virtues.
• Virtue ethics focus on words such as responsibility, honesty, competence, and loyalty

• Vices are dishonesty, disloyalty and irresponsibility
- Alasdair MacIntyre – virtue ethicist
- Concept of “internal” and “external” goods
- Particularly applicable to professions
- Considered “Professional Responsibility” a virtue with 4 main components:
  - Self direction
  - Public spirited
  - Team work
  - Proficiency
    - (Martin and Schinzinger, p42)
Duty Ethics  (Kant: 1724 – 1804)

• Moral duties are fundamental
• Ethical (right) actions can be written down as a list of duties (be good, be honest etc.)
• **may not** be good for all
• Duty ethical actions express respect for individuals
• Once one’s duties are recognized, then the ethically correct actions are obvious*

• Problem: doesn't allow any flexibility for exceptions when duties conflict.

• For example, if we promised to pay ransom to a hostage taker (a duty), is it all right to deceive the kidnapper to benefit the hostage (another duty).

*Fleddermann  Engineering Ethics
Duty Ethics (Rawls)

- The duties we should follow are what *rational people* would agree to in a hypothetical contracting situation.
- A "rational person":
  - has no self interest (bias)
  - has knowledge about human psychology, society, science etc.
  - will promote their long term interests
  - will seek agreement with others (about principles all will voluntarily follow)

Duty Ethics (Rawls)

• Based on two Principals
  1. Each person is entitled to the most extensive amount of liberty (freedom) without restricting others.

  2. Some may benefit more socially and economically than others

Rights Ethics (John Locke: 1632 – 1704) (3.3.4)

• Humans have the right to life, liberty and property

• Humans have fundamental rights (the right to live, for example) and others have the duty to respect
Right Ethics (Meldon: 1910-1991.)

• Liberty and welfare rights - based on a sense of community

• moral “rights" meant capacity to show concern for others

• allows for welfare rights - everyone has right to community support for basic needs

• some rights arise from others actions, e.g. one has a right to have a promise kept because another person made it.

• Social welfare system reflects this philosophy

Problems with Duty and Rights theories

• Both focused on the individual
• May conflict; what’s good for one group may not be the best for another
• Example:
  – A person at the base of a damn has the right to have his/her property preserved
  – People in surrounding community have the right to electricity, and flooding control
Virtue Ethics
(3.3.5)

• Virtue ethics is interested in determining “what kind of people we should be” Fleddermann

• Virtue is closely tied to personal character

• Virtues are:
  – Desirable features of character
  – Moral distinction and goodness
  – Desirable ways to treat other groups and organizations
Utilitarianism (3.3.2)

Based on maximizing "goodness"
(Produce the most good for the most people given equal consideration to all affected)

Tries to establish a balance of good over bad consequences

Focused on society versus individual
Act Utilitarianism

(John Mill):

Focuses on individual actions, rather than general rules

An act or action is proper if it produces the most good for the most people involved

Rules should be broken if they lead to the most good
Rule Utilitarianism (Brandt):

Moral rules are most important

Adhering to moral rules will ultimately lead to the most good.
Rule utilitarianism is more rigid than act Utilitarianism

Rules considered in sets called "moral codes". The optimal code is the one that maximizes good for the most people

Act vs. Rule Utilitarianism

More tendency to follow "Rules", as "Act" requires constant interpretation.

In both cases, defining/agreeing on what is "good" is still a problem.

Basis for many of our laws
Cost-Benefit Analysis (3.3.3)

- Is really an application of utilitarianism
- Cost and benefits are assessed
- Only those projects with the highest benefit to cost ratio are implemented

Problem:

Cost are easy to determine but what about the “cost” of the benefits?
Other Ethical views

1996

• Ethical Relativism: it's OK if it's legal or customary

• ~ attempts to reduce moral values to that reflected in laws and local customs (which may vary significantly over time and through cultures)
• **Divine Command Ethics**: right actions are commanded by God; wrong actions are forbidden by God

religion and ethics very closely related for many

• **Ethical Egoism** (Hobbes, Rand): "it's all about me"
  - proposes that we are all driven by pursuit of our own long term interests

• **Ethical Pluralism**: there are many to chose from, one will never fit all - also considers the effect of customs and cultures

Organizational vs Personal Ethics

• Over time, reflects morals of members
  – Some members may have more influence than others

• Potential dilemma! Your standards or the companies?
  – If company higher; theirs
  – If yours is higher;
    • Conscientious refusal
    • Dilemma resolution techniques...
“Moral Development”

• As we develop and mature, our “morals” also develop.

• Three “levels” commonly considered:
  – Pre-conventional (early stages)
  – Conventional (most adults)
  – Post-conventional (minority)

• A continuum
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Kohlberg</th>
<th>Gilligan</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(ethics of rules and rights)</td>
<td>(ethics of care)</td>
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<tr>
<td>pre-conventional</td>
<td>- self-serving, selfish</td>
<td>basically the same as Kohlberg's</td>
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<td>- &quot;what's good for me&quot;</td>
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<td>- avoid punishment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- &quot;Bronze Rule*&quot; (characteristic of small children)</td>
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<tr>
<td>conventional</td>
<td>- do as others do</td>
<td>- don't hurt others</td>
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<td>- accept norms of group, society</td>
<td>- sacrifice self-interest for sake of others</td>
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<td>- consider / please others, loyalty</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- consider expectations of social unit</td>
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<td>- &quot;Silver Rule*&quot; (most people plateau here)</td>
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<tr>
<td>post-conventional</td>
<td>- follow a set of principles concerning rights and the general good</td>
<td>- reasoned balance between caring for others and one's self-interest</td>
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<td>- not tied to self-interests, social convention</td>
<td>- maintain relationships based on mutual caring</td>
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<td>- &quot;moral autonomy&quot;; independent thought.</td>
<td>- context oriented reasoning.</td>
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<td>- &quot;Golden Rule*&quot; (only a few reach this level)</td>
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Martin & Schinzinger
“Metal Rules” - Lynch

• bronze rule: ‘don’t do to others if you’ll get caught or punished’
• silver rule: ‘don’t do to others what you wouldn’t want done to you
• golden rule: ‘do for others what you’d like done for you [or the rest of humanity]’
Heinz’ Dilemma

• In Europe, a woman was near death from a special kind of cancer. There was one drug that the doctors thought might save her. It was a form of radium that a druggist in the same town had recently discovered. The drug was expensive to make, but the druggist was charging ten times what the drug cost him to make. He paid $400 for the radium and charged $4,000 for a small dose of the drug. The sick woman's husband, Heinz, went to everyone he knew to borrow the money and tried every legal means, but he could only get together about $2,000, which is half of what it cost. He told the druggist that his wife was dying, and asked him to sell it cheaper or let him pay later. But the druggist said, "No, I discovered the drug and I'm going to make money from it." So, having tried every legal means, Heinz gets desperate and considers breaking into the man's store to steal the drug for his wife.