Ethical Theories: Utilitarianism

- Why do we need to reason about complex moral problems?
  1. To decide how to act or decide what is right / wrong
  2. To explain our actions and beliefs to others
  3. To present persuasive, logical arguments to defend our action and opinions to a skeptical but open-minded audience

- We will examine several formal ethical theories. Things to remember:
  1. None of them can give us a definitive answer about what is right/wrong. They can only help us make reasoned decisions.
  2. None of them are perfect, but they are useful

- The 5 ethical theories we will cover:
  1. Act utilitarianism
  2. Rule utilitarianism
  3. Kantianism
  4. Social contract theory
  5. Virtue ethics

Utilitarianism

- From English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
- Utilitarianism is based on the principle of utility:
  - An action is right or wrong to the extent that it increases or decreases the “happiness” of the affected parties
- Act utilitarianism: an ethical theory in which the principle of utility is applied to determine whether a specific action is good or bad
  - An action is good if it results in a net increase in utility, and it is bad if it results in a net decrease in utility
  - The action we choose in any given situation is the one that maximizes overall utility
- Utilitarianism does not weight a person’s motivation in determining if an action is good / bad. The only thing that matters is the outcome (called a consequentialist theory)
- What factors go into a utility (i.e. cost/benefit calculation)?
  - Emotional impact on people
  - Amount of people affected
  - How much the action affects people
  - Impact
• Timeframe: immediate vs delayed impact

• What are some of utilitarianism’s strengths?
  o Practical – maximize utility is straightforward provided utilities are accurate
    ▪ Measure the positive and negative effects of each action
    ▪ Choose the action with the most positive effects
  o Forces the decision maker to focus on happiness / benefit
  o General, can be adapted to many scenarios
    ▪ Allows us to be flexible in many circumstances
  o Can allow you to look beyond self-interest and consider the interests of
    others affected by our actions

• What are some of the weaknesses of act utilitarianism?
  o Hard to come up with utility numbers
    ▪ What does it mean to be beneficial to people?
    ▪ Utility can be subjective – where do you draw the line?
  o Ignores fairness, justice, motivations, duty and obligation
    ▪ Can be used to justify actions that are unjust to a minority of people
      if those actions have higher utility for the majority
    ▪ The value of doing the right thing can be difficult to quantify
  o Unforeseen consequences to high utility actions
    ▪ Results are hard to predict with certainty
  o Susceptible to the problem of moral luck – the consequences of an action
    are not fully under the control of the person taking the actions (e.g. the
    bungling burglar)

• Another form is rule utilitarianism: apply the principle of utility to lead us to moral
  rules that, if adopted by everyone, would lead to the greatest overall increase of
  utility for all affected parties.

• Similar to Kantianism but:
  o Rule utilitarianism: based on the action’s consequence
  o Kantianism: based on the action’s motivation

• What are some of the strengths of rule utilitarianism?
  o Forces you to think about group rather than self-interest
  o Once the rules are made, it is easy to follow them – reduces the problem
    of bias in decision making
  o Not affected by the problem of moral luck because it works on the level of
    rules rather than individual actions
  o Exception situations don’t overthrow moral rules

• What are some of the weaknesses of rule utilitarianism?
  o Rule worship: irrational support of the rule even when more good can be
    done by violating it
- Forced to follow the rule that benefits a group – hard to have individual freedom
- Has most of the weakness (if not all) of act utilitarianism