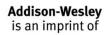# Lecture 2-2: Unworkable Theories; Kantianism

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

Scenario: Intellectual Property

- A software company made a financial management program
  - The program stores extremely sensitive financial data about users on users' hard drives
  - The program is very popular, and widely pirated
- During an automatic software update, the company installs a back door that deletes the data of users who are running a pirated copy
  - Only pirates have their data wiped
  - No user of a legal copy loses any data

- Is the company's behavior unethical?
  A. Yes: The company behaved unethically
  B. No: The company did not behave unethically

Scenario Variations

- Would your answer be different if:
  - The program was for managing photos instead of finances?
  - The data was stored on the company's servers instead of the user's hard drive?
  - The back door existed from the beginning instead of being installed with an update?
  - The back door was disclosed in an End User Licensing Agreement?
    - (that nobody ever reads)

Persuasion Exercise

Try to persuade the other members of your group:

1. Form Groups of 4
   - Identify person A, B, C, D by alphabetical order of first name
2. Person A: Argue using subjective relativism [3 min]
3. Group: Critique Person A's argument [3 min]
4. Person B: Argue using cultural relativism [3 min]
5. Group: Critique Person B's argument [3 min]
6. Person C: Argue using divine command theory [3 min]
7. Group: Critique Person C's argument [3 min]
8. Person D: Argue using ethical egoism [3 min]
9. Group: Critique Person D's argument [3 min]
10. Report back

Discussion

- What was most convincing about the different arguments?

- What was least convincing?

- Was there a critique that applied to all of the theories?

2.6 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)