

# 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

# 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 (1<sup>st</sup> 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 (2<sup>nd</sup> Formulation)

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

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**“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)