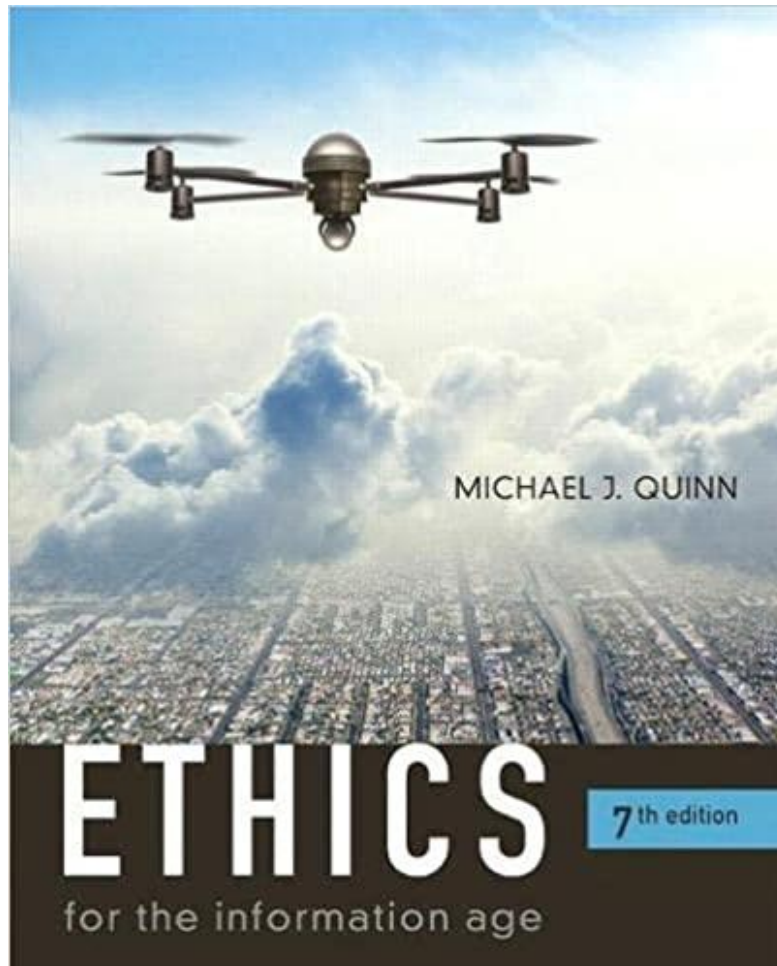


CS 205/299: Professional and Social Issues in Computing

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Ethics for the Information Age

7th Edition



Chapter 2

Introduction to Ethics

What we're covering today: NON-WORKABLE ethical frameworks

2.1 Introduction

2.2 Subjective relativism

2.3 Cultural relativism

2.4 Divine command theory

2.5 Ethical egoism

What we'll cover next week: WORKABLE ethical frameworks

2.6 Kantianism

2.7 Act utilitarianism

2.8 Rule utilitarianism

2.9 Social contract theory

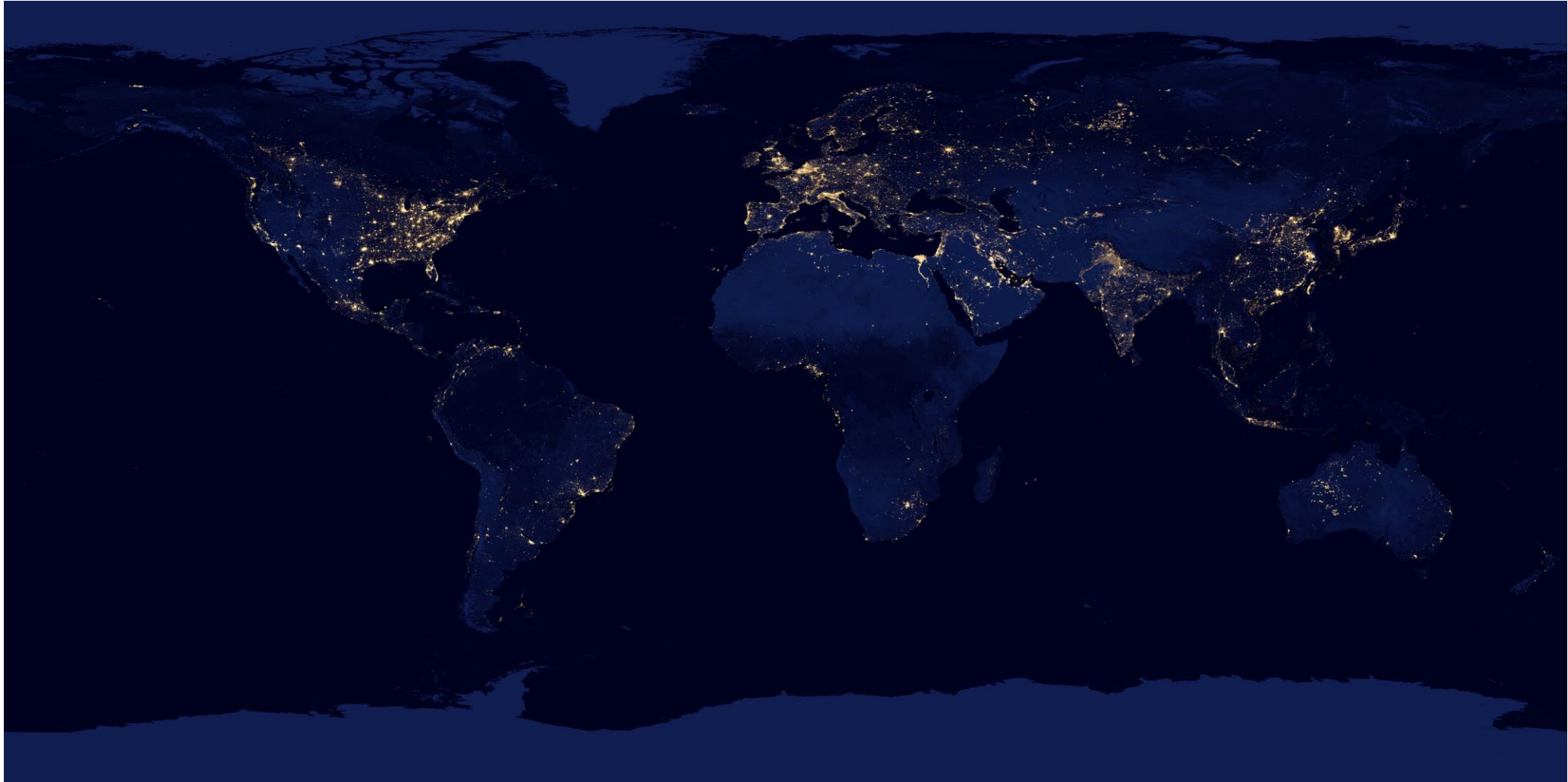
2.10 Virtue ethics

2.11 Comparing workable ethical theories

2.12 Morality of breaking the law

2.1 Introduction

We Live in Communities



[NASA-NOAA Satellite Reveals New Views of Earth at Night | NASA](#)

Living in Communities

- Benefits
 - More secure against external dangers
 - Facilitate exchange of goods and services
 - Higher standard of living from economic specialization
 - **Division of Labor (doctor, engineer, teacher, sanitation...)**
 - Opportunities for fulfilling personal relationships
- Costs
 - Certain actions are prohibited (MURDERRRRR)
 - Other actions are obligatory (pay taxes, vaccinate)
 - Nonconformance can lead to punishment (fines, prison)
- ***Communities exist because benefits outweigh costs***



The Ethical Point of View

- Most everyone shares “core values”, desiring:
 - Life
 - Happiness
 - Security
 - Ability to accomplish goals
- Two ways to view world (though we certainly waffle/mix them)
 - **Selfish point of view**
 - consider only your own self and your core values
 - **Ethical point of view**
 - respect other people and their core values

Defining Terms

- **Society**

- Association of people organized under a system of rules
- Rules: advance/maintain the good of members over time

- **Morality**

- A society's rules of conduct for what people should/should not do in various situations

- **Ethics**

- The philosophical study of morality:
 - Rational examination of morality
 - Examine if the entire system is sound
 - Evaluation of people's behavior
 - Examine if individuals performed the right actions

Why Study Ethics? (1 of 6)

“I changed as a person during this course because I can look at situations from different viewpoints now, viewpoints that I didn’t really have before taking this course.”

— Quote from a student evaluation

Why Study Ethics? (2 of 6)

“I like to think that I do a good job of listening to someone else’s perspective but learning the ethical theories has allowed me to better understand the other person’s side and not just hear it.”

— Quote from a student evaluation

Why Study Ethics? (3 of 6)

“I’ve changed as a person from this course by learning to look at issues more holistically. Ethical issues aren’t often obvious and take some deep diving to come to appropriate decisions.”

— Quote from a student evaluation

Why Study Ethics? (4 of 6)

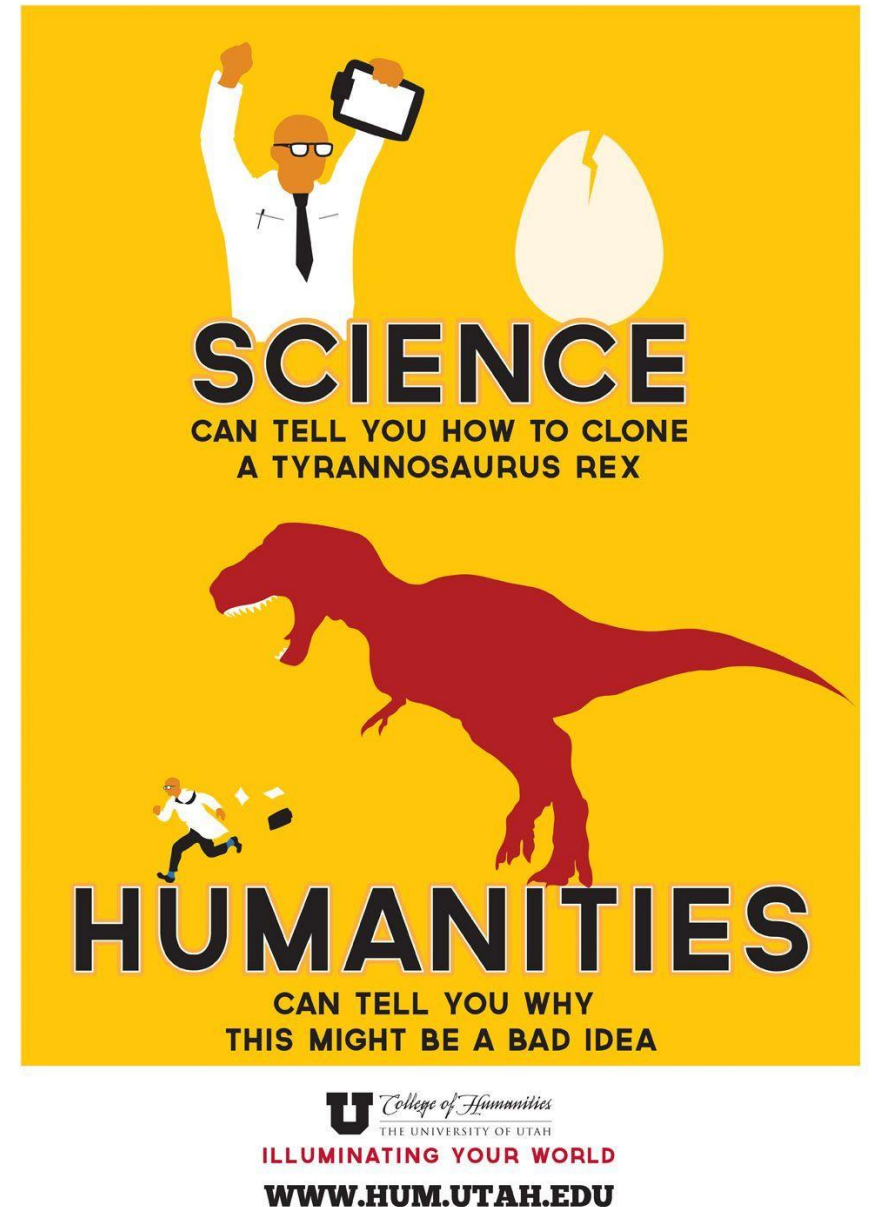
“It is apparent that most of what I have learned was **information that I did not know that I did not know**. In other words, it had never even occurred to me to ask the questions that were discussed in the course.”

— Quote from a student evaluation

Why Study Ethics? (5 of 6)

“Despite having five years of college education, this is the first course that has made me stop and think, ‘Should I do this, even if I have the ability to?’”

— Quote from a graduate student evaluation



Why Study Ethics? (6 of 6)

“Because of this course I have changed the way I approach my work. I co-own a data science startup called <name omitted> where we are developing analytics services that could potentially be misappropriated. Before this course my focus was simply on expanding the service to include as many features as possible. Now, I have instead a process with which to weigh the ethical ramifications of what we do.”

— Quote from a graduate student evaluation

Why Study Ethics... including ethical theory? (Bonus! 7 of 6!)

- Having your own set of morals is a **prerequisite** for successfully navigating ethical quandaries in the real world
 - How are you going to make decisions affecting the wellbeing of yourself and others (data privacy, ethical algorithms, etc.) without a moral compass?
- Examining WHERE your beliefs come from, and WHY you have them, allows you to **articulate, shape, and prune** your own moral bonsai tree
- Ethical frameworks give us some tools for undertaking that examination
 - This class isn't just about reinforcing what you already believe... examine what your current foundation is, and maybe leave some of it at the door?
 - This class is also not about settling on or advocating that everyone adopt one set of values: we're learning tools that dissuade us from making **easy, default/braindead** decisions
- Can help dispel skepticism of ethics
 - "Isn't this just all people's opinions?"
 - "This stuff all just derives from religion!"
 - "Ethics is just a fancy concept for controlling the behavior of others"



Introduction to Ethical Thinking

- Our first group exercise!
- Form groups of 3-4 students
- For each scenario
 - Read the scenario (not aloud 😊)
 - Read the questions following the scenario
 - Write down your individual answers
 - Each group reflects on the questions and collates their responses to the questions
 - Approximately 8-10 minutes per scenario
 - Open discussion regarding the questions between groups

Scenario 1 (1 of 2)

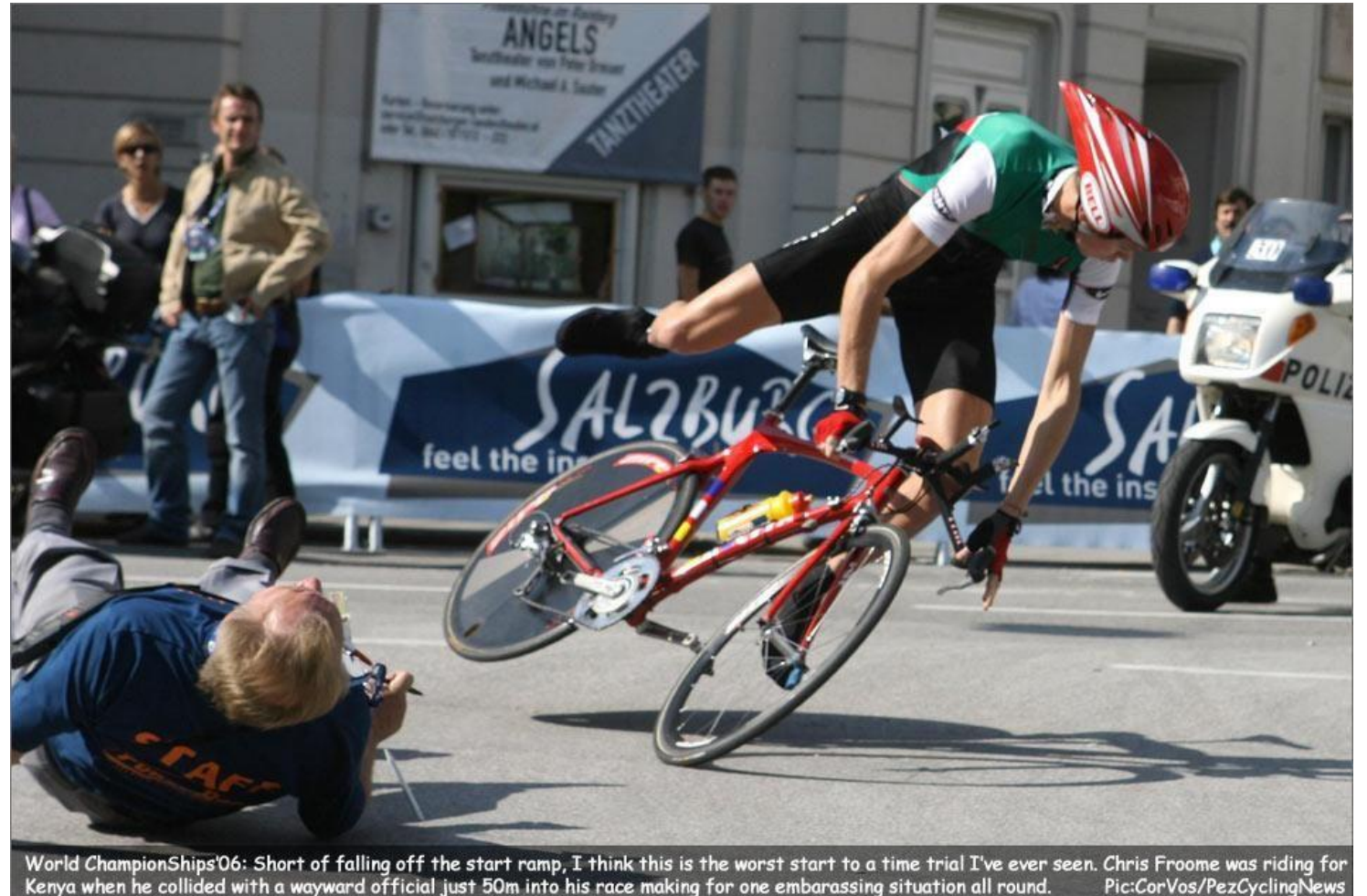
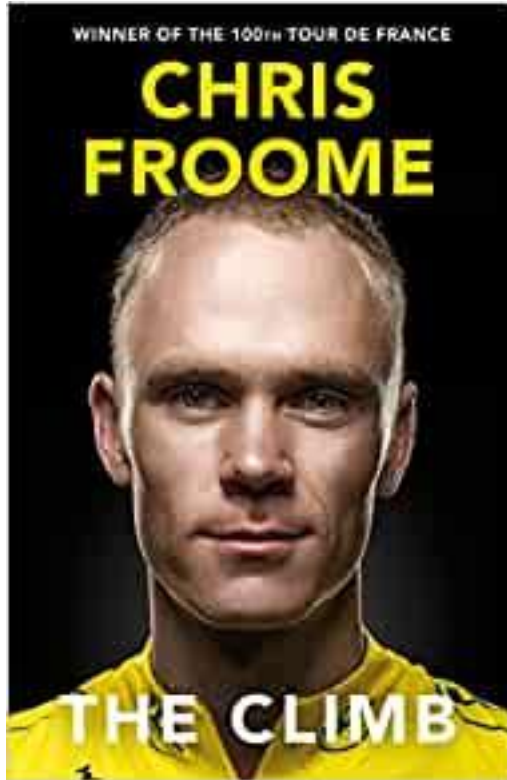
Alexis, a gifted high school student, wants to become a doctor. Because she comes from a poor family, she will need a scholarship in order to attend college. Some of her classes require students to do extra research projects in order to get an A. Her high school has a few older PCs, but there are always long lines of students waiting to use them during the school day. After school, she usually works at a part-time job to help support her family.

One evening Alexis visits the library of a private college a few miles from her family's apartment, and she finds plenty of unused PCs connected to the Internet. She surreptitiously looks over the shoulder of another student to learn a valid login/password combination. Alexis returns to the library several times a week, and by using its PCs and printers she efficiently completes the extra research projects, graduates from high school with straight As, and gets a full-ride scholarship to attend a prestigious university.

Scenario 1 (2 of 2)

- Did Alexis do anything **wrong**?
- **Who benefited** from Alexis's course of action and **how great** were the benefits?
- **Who was harmed** by Alexis's course of action of **how great** were the harms?
- Did Alexis have an **unfair advantage** over her classmates?
- Would your answers change if it turned out that Alexis **did not receive a college scholarship**, but instead is now working at Burger Barn?
- Would your answers change if you knew **which race Alexis** belonged to?
- **Are there better ways** Alexis could have accomplished her objective?
- **What additional information**, if any, would help you answer the previous questions?
- What if Alexis grows up to be a **world-famous doctor** who also **donates her time** generously to perform **free surgeries on underprivileged children** around the world?

A real-world counterpart?



World Championships'06: Short of falling off the start ramp, I think this is the worst start to a time trial I've ever seen. Chris Froome was riding for Kenya when he collided with a wayward official just 50m into his race making for one embarrassing situation all round. Pic:CorVos/PezCyclingNews

<https://www.businessinsider.com/chris-froome-impersonated-official-2016-7>

Scenario 2 (1 of 2)

A US organization dedicated to reducing spam tries to get Internet service providers (ISPs) in an East Asian country to stop a large group of spammers by protecting their email servers. When this effort is unsuccessful, the antispam organization puts the addresses of these ISPs on its blacklist.

Many ISPs in the United States consult the blacklist and refuse to accept email from the blacklisted ISPs. This action has two results.

First, the amount of spam received by the typical email user in the United States drops by 25 percent.

Second, tens of thousands of innocent computer users in the East Asian country are unable to send email to friends and business associates in the United States.

Scenario 2 (2 of 2)

- Did the **antispam organization** do anything **wrong**?
- Did the **ISPs that refused to accept emails** from blacklisted ISPs do anything **wrong**?
- Did the organization **violate anyone's rights**?
- **Who benefited** from the organization's action and **how great** were the benefits?
- **Who was harmed** by the organization's action and **how great** were the harms?
- Could the organization have achieved its goals through a **better course of action**?
- **What additional information**, if any, would help you answer the previous questions?

What does Ethical Analysis cover?

More on Ethics

- Ethics: **rational**, **systematic** analysis
 - Conclusions must be supported by logic, not speculation
 - Best explanations that are based on **facts, shared values, logic**
- Ethics focuses on people's **voluntary**, **moral** choices
 - *Does not consider involuntary or impulsive / reflexive actions*
 - *If you swerve your car to avoid a pedestrian and hit someone else, that isn't something we can examine with ethics...*
 - *Unless you made a prior CHOICE to drink alcohol or not wear your glasses*

What is a useful Ethical Theory?

- A useful ethical theory allows its proponents to
 - Examine moral problems,
 - Reach conclusions, and
 - Defend those conclusions before a larger (skeptical, but open-minded) audience

Types of Ethical Theories

2.2 Subjective Relativism

Ethical Relativism

- **No universal standards** of right and wrong
- One person can say “X is right,” another can say “X is wrong,” and **both can be correct**
- We’ll be discussing two flavors of ethical relativism: subjective and cultural

- **IMPORTANT: Relativism is not the same as saying everyone has their own opinion**
- Two individuals or groups can have opposing viewpoints, where each is based on some chain of reasoning via logic and evidence
- Relativism isn’t concerned with **how** someone ends up at an ethical conclusion, only that everyone gets to decide the final morality for themselves, reasoning aside

Subjective Relativism

- **Each person** decides right and wrong **for themselves**
- **“What’s right for you may not be right for me”**
- We define our **individual concepts** of reality, morality, and behavior
- Example:

Prof Hall: “It is morally OK to eat baby jerky.”

You: “Dude no way, that’s morally repugnant!”

Prof Hall: “What’s right for me may not be right for you! We just have different moral codes.”

The Case for Subjective Relativism

- Well-meaning and intelligent people disagree on moral issues
- Ethical debates are disagreeable and pointless
 - *There is no singular point of reference to anchor our individual beliefs*
 - The debate on abortion in the US has been going on for more than 40 years!
 - Gun laws have been relatively intact in spite of mass shootings

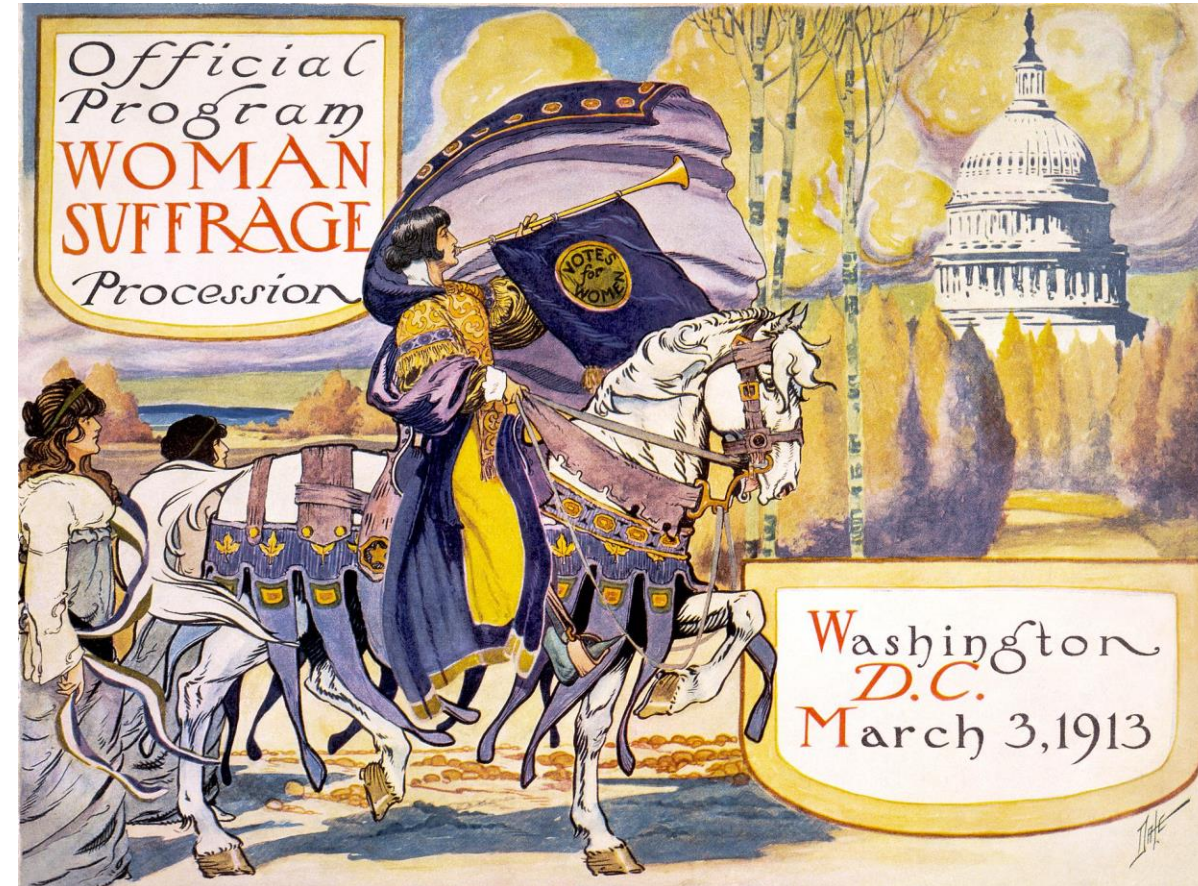
The Case Against Subjective Relativism

- Blurs the line between **doing what you think is right** Vs **doing what you feel like doing**
 - A convenient defense when your conduct is being examined by yourself or others
- Makes **no moral distinction** between the actions of different people
 - Adolf Hitler Vs Florence Nightingale (both were right from their individual PoV)
- Subjective relativism and tolerance are two different things
 - Is it ok with you if someone else **decides to be intolerant**?
 - Universally-applicable rules (e.g. DON'T BE RACIST) contradict Subjective Relativism
- Decisions may not be based on reason
 - Individually-held world views may not be sound in their origin
- Conclusion: **Not a workable ethical theory**

2.3 Cultural Relativism

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 another society or at another time
- Note again, that Cultural Relativism doesn't mean a DIFFERENCE OF OPINION about the **reasoning**, it's that cultural differences are **in themselves** the moral justification
- We have anthropological / archeological evidence that our lives are very different from our ancestors just a few generations ago
 - Gender-based – Women's Suffrage movement
 - Race-based – Slavery, Civil Rights



The Case for Cultural Relativism

- Different social contexts demand different moral guidelines
 - Our relationship with our environment has changed drastically since the Industrial Revolution
- It is arrogant for one society to judge another
 - Technology does not equate with “better” humans
 - We (21st Century) should be careful in passing judgement on someone who lived in 15th century
- First rule of the game: “Survive”

The Case Against Cultural Relativism (1 of 2)

- Because two societies **do** have different moral views doesn't mean they **ought to** have different views
 - We should strongly condemn human sacrifices, even those made in the 15th century
- It doesn't explain how moral guidelines are determined
 - No structured pathway to assimilation of new individuals (immigrants)
 - Polling can be misleading
- What if there are no cultural norms?
 - What separates a human sacrifice (potentially allowed) from pure murder?
- It doesn't account for evolution of moral guidelines.
 - Segregation (US), Apartheid (RSA), Caste System (IND)
- It provides no way out for cultures in conflict
 - The conflict between Israel & Palestine

The Case Against Cultural Relativism (2 of 2)

- Existence of many acceptable practices does not imply all practices are acceptable (many/any fallacy)
 - “Relativism” does not imply “anything goes”
- Societies do, in fact, share certain core values
 - They are after all – communities of humans
 - Caring for children, the elderly, the infirm
- Only indirectly based on reason
 - The sense of belonging is rooted in traditions
- **Conclusion: Not a workable ethical theory**

2.4 Divine Command Theory

Overview of Divine Command Theory

- Good actions: those aligned with God's will
- Bad actions: those contrary to God's will
- Holy books / scriptures reveal God's will
- We should use holy books as moral decision-making guides
 - A more fundamentalist stance
 - Modern sects have branched out to other sources as a guide to morality



The Case for Divine Command Theory

- We owe obedience to our Creator
 - God is the master of our destinies, and hence should be revered and followed
- God is all-good and all-knowing
 - God's word(s) are qualitatively the highest in terms of morality and expanse
- God is the ultimate authority
 - All moral decisions in a society are governed by God's guidance

The Case Against Divine Command Theory

- Different holy books disagree on certain teachings
 - Plurality of cultures implies vastly different interpretations of an ancient work
- Divine command theory is **impractical** because **society is multicultural, secular**
 - It would not be acceptable as a societal norm for individuals from other religions, or atheists
 - Such societies are often termed “fundamentalist”
- Some modern moral problems not directly addressed in scripture
 - Most holy books do not mention the Internet (or Coca Cola)
- It is fallacious to equate “God” == “the good”
 - *Do we believe something is good because God said so, or did God say so because it was inherently good?* (Socrates)
 - Equivalence Fallacy
- Based on obedience, not reason
 - No room for growth of knowledge
- **Conclusion: Not a workable ethical theory for our purposes**

2.5 Ethical Egoism

Definition of Ethical Egoism

- *Each person should focus exclusively on their self-interest*
- What is a “morally right action” under Ethical Egoism
 - An action that provides **self** with **maximum long-term benefit**, *in a particular situation*
- Ayn Rand, author of **The Fountainhead** and **Atlas Shrugged**, espoused a theory akin to ethical egoism - her theory is much different
 - Objectivism
 - Roots in Aristotle’s works
 - Is very popular amongst teenagers and right-wing ideologists



Case for Ethical Egoism

- It is practical since we are already inclined to do what's best for ourselves
 - No need to sacrifice our happiness for the sake of others
- It is better to let other people take care of themselves
 - Foster independence, less reliance on charity
 - Allows individuals to build a high self-esteem
- The community can benefit when individuals put their well-being first
 - Successful entrepreneurs also create employment
- Other moral principles are rooted in the principle of self-interest
 - Ethical Egoism is founded upon rational principles
 - Long-term interests ensure that moral conduct is consistent (no contradictions, no hypocrisy)

The Case Against Ethical Egoism (1 of 2)

- An easy moral philosophy may not be the best moral philosophy
 - **Humans may not act in their best self-interest**
 - Natural inclinations at odds with self-interests
 - Addiction – “I know it is bad, but I cannot help it!”
- **We know a lot about what is good for someone else**
 - Common, shared goals as communities or societies
 - ***Communities exist because benefits outweigh costs***
 - Charities support independence, not dependence (e.g. scholarships)
- Self-interest can lead to blatantly immoral behavior
 - We can be selfish without regards to the difficulties of others
 - Opioid crisis in the US / Financial institutions

Case Against Ethical Egoism (2 of 2)

- Other moral principles are superior to principle of self-interest
 - Would you save a drowning person only because it gave you some long-term benefit?
- People who take the good of others into account lead happier lives
 - A long-term study (20 years) discovered that community ties help strengthen the feeling of happiness
- By definition, does not respect the ethical point of view
 - Focus on individual, not the community
- **Conclusion: Not a workable ethical theory**

Thank you!

See you next time!