Ethics in computer science: Philosophical Bases

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Sources of inspiration

▶ Coursera MOOC from the University of Geneva (2018): *Le Bien, le Juste, l’Utile. Introduction aux éthiques philosophiques*
▶ *L’éthique aux interfaces entre biologie/santé et sciences de l’information* (2016). H. Chneiweiss. (with his approval)
▶ Wikipedia
Definitions

The Question Behind

Virtue Ethics

Deontological (duty) Ethics

Utilitarianism

A Question of Time

To finish
Ethics?

soft law

https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ethics
Ethics is not law

Law: sets minimum standards (rules and regulations)

vs

Ethics: sets maximum standards
Why should you care?

- because you are a citizen, not only a researcher
- because if you don’t as specialists, others with less knowledge will
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Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life

If it took God six days to create the Heavens and the Earth...
and Monty Python ninety minutes to screw it up.

(c) 1983 Universal City Studios. All rights reserved.
What is a good life?

How humans should best live (to achieve this good life)
Definitions

The Question Behind

Virtue Ethics
  Origins
  Principles

Deontological (duty) Ethics

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To finish
Aristotle (384–322 BC)

After Lysippos - Jastrow (2006)

Work on ethics

Nicomachean Ethics
Ethics is about happiness, feeling good

Which “good”? 
▶ each (intermediary) good (pleasure, money, etc) is linked to another
▶ except the **sovereign good**: supreme good, not linked to another

Inspired by nature (proper function of a being):
▶ plants: a good life is to grow, to produce fruits
▶ dogs: satisfaction of senses
▶ specific for human: choose our life and the goal of our life (**practical reason**)

⇒ thinking in terms of being a ”good” person
Ethics is about action (not theory)

Do the best thing, make the best choices: a virtuous man is a virtuoso (perfectionism)

To achieve this:

- exercise being virtuous
- be surrounded by virtuous persons

Main virtue = **prudence** (not too much, not to little: middle ground)
Is happiness our goal in life?
Definitions

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To finish
Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

Work on ethics

Critique of Pure Reason
Critique of Practical Reason
The Imperative of the Practical Reason

Inflexible order of nature → to be really free I have to reason (practically) and act accordingly, without being the slave of my passions

- submission to duty (internal law: wanting to do good) elevates us (perfectionism)
- test: universalization (care for others)

⇒ thinking in terms of the ”right” action
Kant’s ethics

- Perfectionist: the human being should aim at being better
- Moral principle is a priori and **absolute** ("you shall not kill/steal")
Contemporary Deontological Ethics

Opening towards two dimensions:

- Jürgen Habermas (1929-): open to other people (intra-generational ethics)
  - discourse ethics: a respectful, symmetric, authentic discussion with all concerned will generate the best solution

- Hans Jonas (1903-1993): open to other generations (inter-generational ethics)
  - ethics of responsibility: preserve what is fragile and vulnerable
    → precautionary principle
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**Utilitarianism**
- Origins
- Principles

A Question of Time

To finish
Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832)

Work on ethics
The Principles of Morals and Legislation

By Henry William Pickersgill

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

Work on ethics
Essay on Bentham

London Stereoscopic Company - Hulton Archive
Bentham’s Utilitarianism

Scientific, truly altruistic, method:

- observation of human behaviours: they want **pleasure**
- counting positive and negative points (money) for each decision to be made
- each person counts for 1 (nobody matters more than the others, even the agent)

⇒ maximize pleasure for a maximum of persons (beings)
⇒ no perfectionism
⇒ thinking in terms of the consequences of an action
Mill's Utilitarianism

Maximize **happiness** (not pleasure)

 Adds **virtue** as part of happiness (hierarchy in pleasures)
Contemporary Utilitarianism: consequentialism

Only consequences matter

Criteria: satisfaction of preferences, well-being, still not moral

But no more calculus

Which consequences matter?

- everybody counts for 1: problem (1 person can be killed to save more)
- average vs addition, negative?
- of each act, for the agent (if the agent kill 1 person it has really negative effects on the agent)
- virtues with good consequences (virtue consequentialism)
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Is (techno)Science Necessarily Good?

(some) Turning Points in the XXth century

To finish
Is (the outcome of) science necessarily good?

Are there things that are possible to do that we agree we should not?
Is (the way we do) science necessarily good?

Are there things that are possible to do that we agree we should not?
The Nuremberg Code
originated before, but finalized during "the Doctors’ Trial" (1947)
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10 main principles, including:
▶ Respect of the subject:
  ▶ informed consent
  ▶ freedom to quit the experiment
▶ Beneficence:
  ▶ favorable risks/benefits balance
▶ Justice:
  ▶ positive results for society
The Belmont Report [Bel, 1979] originated from "Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment" (1932-1972)

By National Archives Atlanta, GA
The Belmont Report [Bel, 1979] originated from "Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment" (1932-1972)

The report includes 3 main principles:

► Respect of the subject:
  ▶ informed consent

► Beneficience:
  ▶ favorable risks/benefits balance

► Justice:
  ▶ fair selection of the subjects
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   WYHTR: What You Have To Remember
Opening the ethical chakras: not just consequentialism

What is good?

Kant: Act in line with duties
Aristotle: Strive for excellence
Bentham: Do the math
Arendt: Think

7:54 AM · 8 juin 2022 · Twitter for iPhone
(1979).
The belmont report: Ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research.