**Handouts of Lecture 3 Professional Practices (IT)**

**Lecture Title: Introduction to Ethics**

Ethics can be defined as,

“The discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation.”

**Introduction**

Forming communities allows us to enjoy better lives than if we lived in isolation. Communities facilitate the exchange of goods and services. Instead of each family assuming responsibility for all of its needs, such as food, housing, clothing, education, and health care, individuals can focus on particular activities. Specialization results in higher productivity that increases everyone’s quality of life. Communities foster the development of fulfilling personal relationships, and they make people more secure against external dangers.

There is a price associated with being part of a community. Communities prohibit certain actions and make other actions obligatory. Those who do not conform to these prohibitions and obligations can be punished. Still, the fact that almost everyone *does* live in a community is strong evidence that the advantages of community life outweigh the disadvantages.

Responsible community members take the needs and desires of other people into account when they make decisions. They recognize that virtually everybody shares the “core values” of life, happiness, and the ability to accomplish goals. People who respect only their own needs and desires are taking the selfish point of view. Moving to the “ethical point of view” requires a decision that other people and their core values are also worthy of respect.

People who take the ethical point of view may still disagree over what is the proper course of action to take in a particular situation. Sometimes the facts of the matters are disputable. At other times, different value judgments arising from competing ethical theories lead people to opposite conclusions. For this reason, it is worthwhile to have a basic understanding of some of the most popular ethical theories. In this chapter we describe the difference between morality and ethics, discuss a variety of ethical theories, evaluate their pros and cons, and show how to use the more viable ethical theories to solve moral problems.

**Society, Morality and Ethics**

A **society** is an association of people organized under a system of rules designed to advance the good of its members over time. Cooperation among individuals helps promote the common good. However, people in a society also compete with each other; for example, when deciding how to divide limited benefits among themselves. Sometimes the competition is relatively trivial, such as when many people vie for tickets to a concert. At other times the competition is much more significant, such as when two start-up companies seek dominance of an emerging market. Every society has rules of conduct describing what people ought and ought not to do in various situations. We call these rules **morality**.

A person may simultaneously belong to multiple societies, which can lead to moral dilemmas. For example, what happens when a pacifist (according to the rules of his religion) is drafted to serve in the armed forces (according to the laws of his nation)?

**Ethics** is the philosophical study of morality, a rational examination into people’s moral beliefs and behavior. Consider the following analogy (Figure ). Society is like a town full of people driving cars. Morality is the road network within the town. People ought to keep their cars on the roads. Those who choose to “do ethics” are in balloons floating above the town. From this perspective, an observer can evaluate individual roads (particular moral guidelines) as well as the quality of the entire road network (moral system). The observer can also judge whether individual drivers are staying on the roads (acting morally) or taking shortcuts (acting immorally).



**Figure : Analogy for Difference between Morality and Ethics**

Finally, the observer can propose and evaluate various ways of constructing road networks (alternative moral systems). While there may in fact be a definite answer regarding the best way to construct and operate a road network, it may be difficult for the observers to identify and agree

upon this answer, because each observer has a different viewpoint. The study of ethics is particularly important right now. Our society is changing rapidly as it incorporates the latest advances in information technology. Just think about how cell phones, portable digital music players, tablets, and social apps have changed how we spend our time and interact with others! These inventions have brought us many benefits. However, some people selfishly exploit new technologies for personal gain, even if that reduces their overall benefit for the rest of us. Here are two examples. While most of us are happy to have the ability to send email to people all over the world, others engage in “phishing” to steal financial information. Access to the World Wide

Web provides libraries with an important new information resource for their patrons, but should children be allowed to follow links leading to pornographicWeb sites? When we encounter new problems such as phishing or pornographicWeb sites, we need to decide which activities are morally “good,” which are morally “neutral,” and which are morally “bad.” Unfortunately, existing moral guidelines sometimes seem old fashioned or unclear. If we can’t always count on “common wisdom” to help us answer these questions, we need to learn how to work through these problems ourselves.

**Overview of Ethical Theories**

The formal study of ethics goes back at least 2,400 years, to the Greek philosopher Socrates. Socrates did not put any of his philosophy in writing, but his student Plato did. In Plato’s dialogue called the *Crito*, imprisoned Socrates uses ethical reasoning to explain why he ought to face an unjust death penalty rather than take advantage of an opportunity to flee into exile with his family.

In the past two millennia, philosophers have proposed many ethical theories. In this lecture we review some of them. How do we decide if a particular theory is useful? A useful theory allows its proponents to examine moral problems, reach conclusions, and defend those conclusions in front of a skeptical, yet open-minded audience. Suppose you and I are debating a moral problem in front of a nonpartisan crowd. You have concluded that a particular course of action is right, while I believe it is wrong. It is only natural for me to ask you, “Why do you think doing such-and-such is right?” If you are unable to give any logical reasons why your position is correct, you are unlikely to persuade anyone. On the other hand, if you can explain the chain of reasoning that led you to your conclusion, you will be more likely to convince the audience that your position is correct. At the very least you will help reveal where there are disputed facts or values. Therefore, we will reject proposed ethical theories that are not based on reasoning from facts or commonly accepted values. In the following sections we consider ethical theories— frameworks for moral decision making. We present the motivation or insight underlying each theory, explain how it can be used to determine whether an action is right or wrong, and give the “case for” and the “case against” the theory. The workable theories will be those that make it possible for a person to present a persuasive, logical argument to a diverse audience of skeptical, yet open-minded people.

The principal sources for these brief introductions to ethical theories are *Ethical Insights: A Brief Introduction* by Douglas Birsch, *The Elements ofMoral Philosophy* byJames Rachels, and *On Virtue Ethics* by Rosalind Hursthouse.

**1) Subjective Relativism**

**Relativism** is the theory that there are no universal moral norms of right and wrong. According to this theory, different individuals or groups of people can have completely opposite views of a moral problem, and both can be right. Two particular kinds of relativism we’ll discuss are subjective relativism and cultural relativism. **Subjective relativism** holds that each person decides right and wrong for himself or herself. This notion is captured in the popular expression, “What’s right for you may not be right for me.”

**The Case for Subjective Relativism**

1. *Well-meaning and intelligent people can have totally opposite opinions about moral*

*issues.*

For example, consider the issue of legalized abortion in the United States. There are a significant number of rational people on each side of the issue. Subjective relativists would contend that the reason people cannot reach the same conclusion is that morality is not like gravity; it is not something “out there” that rational people can discover and try to understand. Instead, each of us creates his or her own morality.

2. *Ethical debates are disagreeable and pointless.*

Going back to the example of abortion, the debate in the United States has been going on for more than 40 years. An agreement about whether abortion is right or wrong may never be reached. Nobody is all-knowing. When faced with a difficult moral problem, who is to say which side is correct? If morality is relative, we do not have to try to reconcile opposing views. Both sides are right.

**The Case against Subjective Relativism**

1. *With subjective relativism the line between doing what you think is right and doing*

*what you want to do is not sharply drawn.*

People are good at rationalizing their bad behavior. Subjective relativism provides an ideal last line of defense for someone whose conduct is being questioned. When pressed to explain a decision or action, a subjective relativist can reply, “Who are *you* to tell *me* what I should and should not do?” If morality means doing whatever you want to do, it doesn’t mean much, if it means anything at all.

2. *By allowing each person to decide right and wrong for himself or herself, subjective*

*relativism makes no moral distinction between the actions of different people.*

The fact is that some people have caused millions to suffer, while others have led lives of great service to humanity. Suppose both Adolf Hitler and Mother Teresa spent their entire lives doing what they thought was the right thing to do. Do you want to give both of them credit for living good lives? A modification of the original formulation of subjective relativism might be, “I can decide what’s right for me, as long as my actions don’t hurt anybody else.” That solves the problem of Adolf Hitler versus Mother Teresa. However, as soon as you introduce the idea that you shouldn’t harm others, you must come to an agreement with others about what it means to harm someone. At this point the process is no longer subjective or completely up to the individual. In other words, a statement of the form, “I can decide what’s right for me, as long as my actions don’t hurt anyone else,” is inconsistent with subjective relativism.

3. *Subjective relativism and tolerance are two different things.*

Some people may be attracted to relativism because they believe in tolerance. There is a lot to be said for tolerance. It allows individuals in a pluralistic society like the United States to live in harmony. However, tolerance is not the same thing as subjective relativism. Subjective relativism holds that individuals decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong. If you are a tolerant person, is it okay with you if some people decide they want to be intolerant? What if a person decides that he will only deal fairly with people of his own racial group? Note that any statement of the form, “People ought to be tolerant,” is an example of a universal moral **norm**, or rule. Relativism is based on the idea that there are *no* universal moral norms, so a blanket statement about the need for tolerance is incompatible with subjective relativism.

4. *We should not give legitimacy to an ethical theory that allows people to make decisions*

*based on something other than reason.*

If individuals decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong, they can reach their conclusions by any means they see fit. They may choose to base their decisions on something other than logic and reason, such as the rolling of dice or the turning of tarot cards. This path is contrary to using logic and reason. If your goal is to persuade others that your solutions to actual moral problems are correct, adopting subjective relativism is self-defeating because it is based on the idea that each person decides for himself or herself what is right and what is wrong. According to subjective relativism, nobody’s conclusions are any more valid that anyone else’s, no matter how these conclusions are drawn. Therefore, we reject subjective relativism as a workable ethical theory.

**2) Cultural Relativism**

If subjective relativism is unworkable, what about different views of right and wrong held by different societies at the same point in time, or those held by the same society at different points in time? In the modern era, anthropologists have collected evidence of societies with moral codes markedly different from those of the societies of Europe and North America. William Graham Sumner described the evolution of “folkways,” which he argues eventually become institutionalized into the moral guidelines of a society: The first task of life is to live. The struggle to maintain existence was not carried on individually but in groups. Each profited by the other’s experience; hence there was concurrence towards that which proved to be the most expedient. All at last adopted the same way for the same purpose; hence the ways turned into customs and became mass phenomena. Instincts were learned in connection with them. In this way folkways arise. The young learn by tradition, imitation, and authority. The folkways, at a time, provide for all the needs of life then and there. They are uniform, universal in the group, imperative, and invariable. As time goes on, the folkways become more and more arbitrary, positive, and imperative. If asked why

they act in a certain way in certain cases, primitive people always answer that it is because they and their ancestors always have done so. . . . The morality of a group at a time is the sum of the taboos and prescriptions in the folkways by which right conduct is defined. . . . ‘Good’mores are those which are well adapted to the situation. ‘Bad’ mores are those which are not so well adapted.

**Cultural relativism** is the ethical theory that the meaning of “right” and “wrong” rests with a society’s actual moral guidelines. These guidelines vary from place to place and from time to time.

Charles Hampden-Turner and Fons Trompenaars conducted a modern study that reveals how notions of right and wrong vary widely from one society to another. Here is a dilemma they posed to people from 46 different countries: You are riding in a car driven by a close friend. He hits a pedestrian. You know he was going at least 35 miles per hour in an area of the city where the maximum allowed speed is 20 miles per hour. There are no witnesses other than you. His lawyer says that if you testify under oath that he was driving only 20 miles per hour, you will save him from serious consequences. What right has your friend to expect you to protect him?

My friend has a definite right as a friend to expect me to testify to the lower speed.

* He has some right as a friend to expect me to testify to the lower speed.
* He has no right as a friend to expect me to testify to the lower speed.

What do you think you would do in view of the obligations of a sworn witness and the obligation to your friend?

* Testify that he was going 20 miles per hour.
* Not testify that he was going 20 miles per hour.

About 90 percent of Norwegians would not testify to the lower speed and do not believe that the person’s friend has a definite right to expect help. In contrast, only about 10 percent of Yugoslavians feel the same way. About three-quarters of Americans and Canadians agree with the dominant Norwegian view, but Mexicans are fairly evenly divided. Cultural relativists say we ought to pay attention to these differences.

**The Case for Cultural Relativism**

1. *Different social contexts demand different moral guidelines.*

It’s unrealistic to assume that the same set of moral guidelines can be expected to work for all human societies in every part of the world for all ages. Just think about how our relationship with our environment has changed. For most of the past 10,000 years, human beings have spent most of their time trying to produce enough food to survive. Thanks to science and technology, the human population of the Earth has increased exponentially in the past century. The struggle for survival has shifted away from people to the rest of Nature. Overpopulation has created a host of environmental problems, such as the extinction of many species, the destruction of fisheries in the world’s oceans, and the accumulation of greenhouse gases. People must change their ideas about what is acceptable conduct and what is not, or they will destroy the planet.

2. *It is arrogant for one society to judge another.*

Anthropologists have documented many important differences among societies with respect to what they consider proper and improper moral conduct. We may have more technology than people in other societies, but we are no more intelligent than they are. It is arrogant for a person living in twenty-first-century Italy to judge the actions of another person who lived in the Inca Empire in the fifteenth century.

**The Case against Cultural Relativism**

1. *Just because two societies do have different views about right and wrong doesn’t imply*

*that they ought to have different views.*

Perhaps one society has good guidelines and another has bad guidelines. Perhaps neither society has good guidelines. Suppose two societies are suffering from a severe drought. The first society constructs an aqueduct to carry water to the affected cities. The second society makes human sacrifices to appease the rain god. Are both “solutions” equally acceptable? No, they are not. Yet, if we accept cultural relativism, we cannot speak out against this wrongdoing, because no person in one society can make any statements about the morality of another society.

2. *Cultural relativism does not explain how an individual determines the moral guidelines*

*of a particular society.*

Suppose I am new to a society and I understand I am supposed to abide by its moral guidelines. How do I determine what those guidelines are? One approach would be to poll other people, but this begs the question. Here’s why. Suppose I ask other people whether the society considers a action to be morally acceptable. I’m not interested in knowing whether they feel personally that the action is right or wrong. I want them to tell me whether the society thinks the action is moral. That puts the people I poll in the same position I’m in—trying to determine the moral guidelines of a society. How are they to know whether the action is right or wrong? Perhaps the guidelines are summarized in the society’s laws, but laws take time to enact. Hence the legal code reflects at best the moral guidelines of the same society at some point in the past, but that’s not the same society I am living in today, because the morals of any society change over time. That leads us to our next objection.

3. *Cultural relativism does not explain how to determine right from wrong when there are*

*no cultural norms.*

Sometimes different groups within a society disagree about whether a particular action is right or wrong. This situation often occurs when a new technology emerges. For example, the Internet has made possible massive exchanges of digitized information. Millions of Americans seem to think sharing copy righted music is okay, but other groups insist this activity is nothing more than stealing. Who is correct?

4. *Cultural relativism does not do a good job of characterizing actions when moral guidelines*

*evolve.*

Until the 1960s many southern American states had segregated universities. Today these universities are integrated. This change in attitudes was accelerated by the actions of a few brave people of color who challenged the status quo and enrolled in universities that had been the exclusive preserve of white students. At the time these students were doing what they “ought not” to have done; they were doing something wrong according to the moral guidelines of the time. By today’s standards they did nothing wrong, and many people view them as heroic figures. Doesn’t it make more sense to believe that their actions were the right thing to do all along?

5. *Cultural relativism provides no framework for reconciliation between cultures in conflict.*

Think about the culture of the Palestinians who have been crowded into refugee camps in the Gaza Strip for more than 60 years. Some of these people are completely committed to an armed struggle against Israel. Meanwhile, some people in Israel believe the Jewish state ought to be larger and are completely committed to the expansion of settlements into the Gaza Strip. The values of each society lead to actions that harm the other, yet cultural relativism says each society’s moral guidelines are right. Cultural relativism provides no way out—no way for the two sides to find common ground.

6. *The existence of many acceptable cultural practices does not imply that any cultural*

*practice would be acceptable.*

Judging many options to be acceptable and then reaching the conclusion that any option is acceptable is called the **many/any fallacy**. To illustrate this fallacy, consider documentation styles for computer programs. There are many good ways to add comments to a program; that does not mean that any commenting style is good. It is false that all possible cultural practices have equal legitimacy. Certain practices must be forbidden and others must be mandated if a society is to survive. This observation leads us directly to our next point.

7. *Societies do, in fact, share certain core values.*

While a superficial observation of the cultural practices of different societies may lead you to believe they are quite different, a closer examination often reveals similar values underlying these practices. James Rachels argues that all societies, in order to maintain their existence, must have a set of core values. For example, newborn babies are helpless. A society must care for its infants if it wishes to continue. Hence a core value of every society is that babies must be cared for. Communities rely upon people being able to believe each other. Hence telling the truth is another core value. Finally, in order to live together, people must not constantly be on guard against attack from their community members. For this reason, a prohibition against murder is a core value of any society. The existence of common values among all societies is a powerful response to the contention that different social contexts demand different moral guidelines, which is at the heart of the argument in favor of cultural relativism. Because societies do share certain core values, there is reason to believe we could use these values as a starting point in the creation of a universal ethical theory that would not have the deficiencies of cultural relativism.

8. *Cultural relativism is only indirectly based on reason.*

As Sumner observed, many moral guidelines are a result of tradition. Traditions develop because they meet a need, but once a tradition has been established, people behave in a certain way because it’s what they’re supposed to do, not because they understand the rationality deeply embedded within the tradition. Cultural relativism has significant weaknesses as a tool for ethical persuasion. According to cultural relativism, the ethical evaluation of a moral problem made by a person in one society may be meaningless when applied to the same moral problem in another society. Cultural relativism suggests there are no universal moral guidelines. It gives tradition more weight in ethical evaluations than facts and reason. For these reasons, cultural relativism is not a powerful tool for constructing ethical evaluations persuasive to a diverse audience, and we consider it no further.

**3) Divine Command Theory**

The three great religious traditions that arose in the Middle East—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—teach that a single God is the creator of the universe and that human beings are part of God’s creation. Each of these religions has sacred writings containing God’s revelation.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims all believe that God inspired the Torah. Here is a selection of verses from Chapter 19 of the third book of the Torah, called Leviticus: You shall each revere his mother and his father, and keep My sabbaths. When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap all the way to the edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not pick your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger. You shall not steal; you shall not deal deceitfully or falsely with one another. You shall not swear falsely by My name. You shall not defraud your neighbor. You shall not commit robbery. The wages of a laborer shall not remain with you until morning. You shall not insult the deaf, or place a stumbling block before the blind. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your kinsfolk. Love your neighbor as yourself.

The **divine command theory** is based on the idea that good actions are those aligned with the will of God and bad actions are those contrary to the will of God. Since the holy books contain God’s directions, we can use the holy books as moral decision-making guides. God says we should revere our mothers and fathers, so revering our parents is good.

It is important to note that the divine command theory is subscribed to by some, but not all, Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Fundamentalists are more likely to consider holy books authentic and authoritative. Most sects within these religious traditions augment holy books with other sources when developing their moral codes.

**The Case for the Divine Command Theory**

1. *We owe obedience to our Creator.*

God is the creator of the universe. God created each one of us. We are dependent upon God for our lives. For this reason, we are obligated to follow God’s rules.

2. *God is all-good and all-knowing.*

God loves us and wants the best for us. God is omniscient; we are not. Because God knows better than we do what we must do to be happy, we should align ourselves with the will of God.

3. *God is the ultimate authority.*

Since most people are religious, they are more likely to submit to God’s law than to a law made by people. Our goal is to create a society where everyone obeys the moral laws. Therefore, our moral laws should be based on God’s directions to us.

**The Case against the Divine Command Theory**

1. *There are many holy books, and some of their teachings disagree with each other.*

There is no single holy book that is recognized by people of all faiths, and it is unrealistic to assume everyone in a society will adopt the same religion. Even among Christians there are different versions of the Bible. The Catholic Bible has six books not found in the Protestant Bible. Some Protestant denominations rely upon the King James version, but others use more modern translations. Every translation has significant differences. Even when people read the same translation, they often interpret the same verse in different ways.

2. *It is unrealistic to assume a multicultural society will adopt a religion-based morality.*

An obvious example is the United States. In the past two centuries, immigrants representing virtually every race, creed, and culture have made America their home. Some Americans are atheists. When a society is made up of people with different religious beliefs, the society’s moral guidelines should emerge from a secular authority, not a religious authority.

3. *Some moral problems are not addressed directly in scripture.*

For example, there are no verses in the Bible mentioning the Internet. When we discuss moral problems arising from information technology, a proponent of the divine command theorymust resort to analogy. At this point the conclusion is based not simply on what appears in the sacred text but also on the insight of the person who invented the analogy. The holy book alone is not sufficient to solve the moral problem.

4. *It is fallacious to equate “the good” with “God.”*

Religious people are likely to agree with the statement “God is good.” That does not mean, however, that God and “the good” are exactly the same thing. Trying to equate two related but distinct things is called the **equivalence fallacy**. Instead, the statement “God is good” means there is an objective standard of goodness that God meets perfectly. Here’s another way to put the question. Is an action good because God commands it, or does God command it because it’s good? This is an ancient question: Plato raised it about 2,400 years ago in the Socratic dialogue *Euthyphro*. In this dialogue, Socrates concludes, “The gods love piety because it is pious, and it is not pious because they love it”. In other words, “the good” is something that exists outside of God and was not created by God. We can reason our way to the same conclusion. If good means “commanded by God,” then good is arbitrary. Why should we praise God for being good if good is whatever God wills? According to this view of the good, it doesn’t matter whether God commanded, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” or “Thou shalt commit adultery.” Either way, the command would have been good by definition. If you object that there is no way God would command us to commit adultery because marital fidelity is good and adultery is bad, then you are proving our point: there is an objective standard of right and wrong separate from God. That means we can talk about the good without talking about God; we can have a nontheological discussion

of the good.

5. *The divine command theory is based on obedience, not reason.*

If good means “willed by God,” and if religious texts contain everything we need to know about what God wills, then there is no room left for collecting and analyzing facts. Hence the divine command theory is not based on reaching sound conclusions from premises through logical reasoning. There is no need for a person to question a commandment. The instruction is right because it’s commanded by God, period.

Consider the story of Abraham in the book of Genesis. God commands Abraham to take his only son, Isaac, up on a mountain, kill him, and make of him a burnt offering. Abraham obeys God’s command and is ready to kill Isaac with his knife when an angel calls down and tells him not to harm the boy. Because he does not withhold his only son from God, God blesses Abraham. Earlier in Genesis God condemns Cain for killing Abel. How, then, can Abraham’s sacrifice of

Isaac be considered good? To devout readers, the logic of God’s command is irrelevant to this story. Abraham is a good person, a heroic model of faith, because he demonstrated his obedience to the will of God. In the divine command theory, moral guidelines are not the result of a logical

progression from a set of underlying principles, and this is a significant problem. While you may choose to live your life so that your actions are aligned with God’s will, the divine command theory often fails to produce arguments that can persuade skeptical listeners whose religious beliefs are different. Hence we conclude the divine command theory is not a powerful weapon for ethical debate in a secular society, and we reject it as a workable theory.

***Referrence:***

***Ethics for the Information Age by Michael J. Quinn***