

CS 205/299: Professional and Social Issues in Computing

Ethan Hall

Workable Ethical Theories

How ethical reasoning can be made practical

Today's lecture

- Social Contract Theory
- Virtue Ethics Theory
- Comparing workable ethical theories

2.9 Social Contract Theory

Basis of Social Contract Theory

- Thomas Hobbes
 - In a “state of nature” our lives would be “solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short”
 - We **implicitly** accept a social contract
 - Establishment of moral rules to govern relations among citizens
 - Government capable of enforcing these rules



Thomas Hobbes
(1588 – 1679)

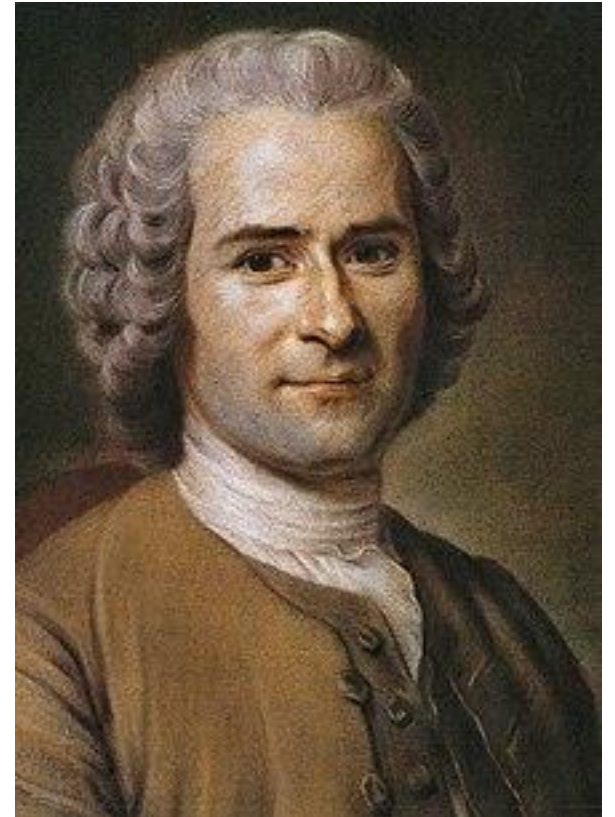
“Father of
Modern
Political
Philosophy”



<https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/3207/pg3207-images.html>

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

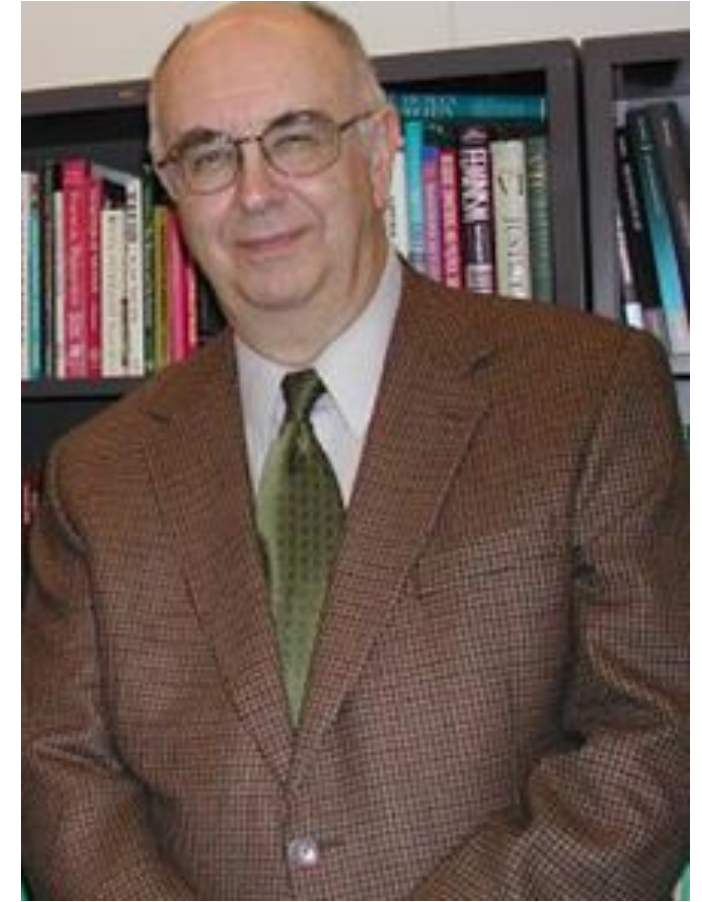
- “Since no man has any natural authority over his fellows, and since force alone bestows no right, all legitimate authority among men must be based on covenants (contracts)”
- In an ideal society, no one is above the rules
 - That prevents society from enacting bad rules (they apply to ALL)
 - The community will determine the rules for its members, and then everyone is obliged to follow the rules
- Wrote *The Social Contract*
 - <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/46333/pg46333-images.html>
- Believed that when we are bound by the social contract that “man, who has hitherto thought only of himself, finds himself compelled to act on other principles, and to consult his reason rather than study his inclinations”
 - (our actions take on a moral quality they otherwise lack)



Jean-Jacques Rousseau
(1712 – 1778)

James Rachels's Definition

*“Morality consists in the set of rules, governing how people are to treat one another, that rational people will agree to accept, for their mutual benefit, **on the condition that others follow those rules as well.**”*



[James Rachels](#)
(1941 – 2003)

(dunno why this guy is important,
but he seems nice enough)

Kinds of Rights

- Negative right: A right that another can guarantee by leaving you alone
 - Freedom of expression – others cannot stop you from expressing yourself
 - **NOT to be interpreted as “*Freedom from Consequences*”**
- Positive right: A right obligating others to do something on your behalf
 - Right to healthcare – If you are ill, others have a duty to treat you (*if you so choose*)
 - Right to free healthcare – If you are ill, others have a duty **to see that you receive treatment**

- Absolute right: A right guaranteed without exception
 - Right to education – Very common in most nations (public school system)
- Limited right: A right that may be restricted based on the circumstances
 - Free education around the world - <https://www.theedadvocate.org/which-countries-provide-free-education-at-a-university-level/>
 - India – Girls do not pay for any K-12 education in fully, or partially, publicly-funded institutions

Correlation between Types of Rights

- Positive rights tend to be more limited
- Negative rights tends to be more absolute
- Kantians -> rights follow from duties
 - Duty not to kill/steal from others, means others have a right to life/property
- Social Contract -> moral rights come from social contract
 - We all agree to accept, via social contract: right to life, property

John Rawls's (1921-2002) Principles of Justice

- Rawls renewed public interest in Social Contract Theory
- We all live in a society because social cooperation produces more benefits than being alone... but even when we're together we compete for a greater slice of the benefit pie
- We need **Principles of Justice**: a just way to distribute the benefits and burdens of social cooperation
- Rawls proposed the **veil of ignorance**: people must agree to these principles before knowing what place they'll hold in society
- Ignorant of race, sex, ethnicity, wealth, social standing, physical/intellectual capacity, etc
- Rational people, under a veil of ignorance, would come up with the following two principles of justice

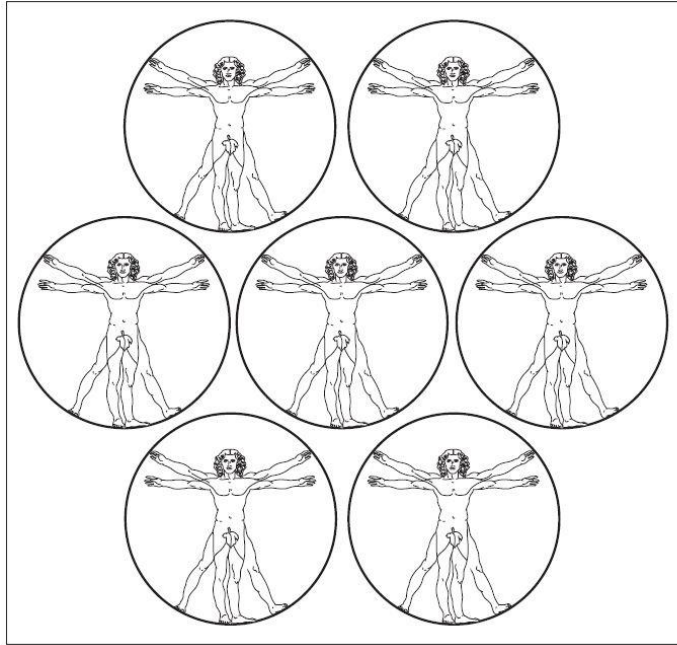
John Rawls's (1921-2002) Principles of Justice

1. Each person may claim a “fully adequate” number of basic rights and liberties, so long as these claims are consistent with everyone else having a claim to the same rights and liberties

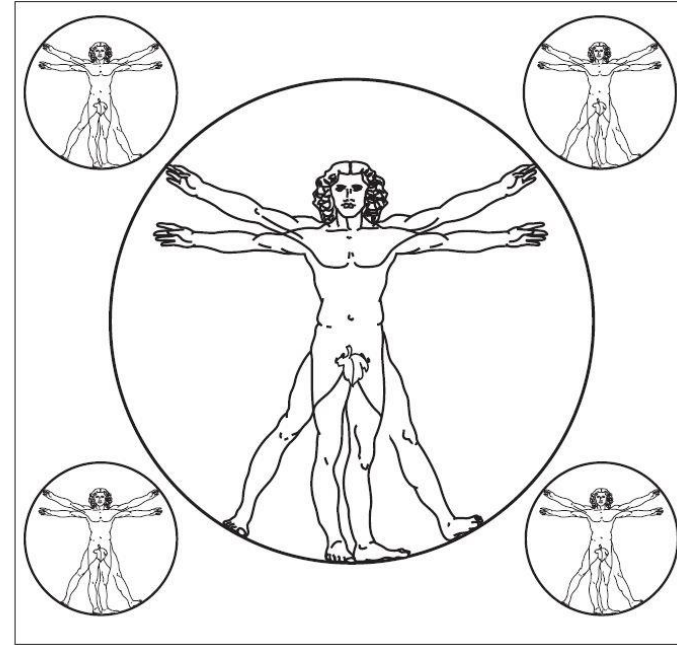
2. Any social and economic inequalities must

- Be associated with positions that everyone has **a fair and equal opportunity to achieve***
- Be to the **greatest benefit of the least-advantaged** members of society (the difference principle)*

Rawls's First Principle of Justice



Just



Unjust

Rawls's first principle of justice states that each person may have a "fully adequate" number of rights and liberties as long as they are consistent with everyone else having the same rights and liberties.

Equal opportunities to be POTUS?

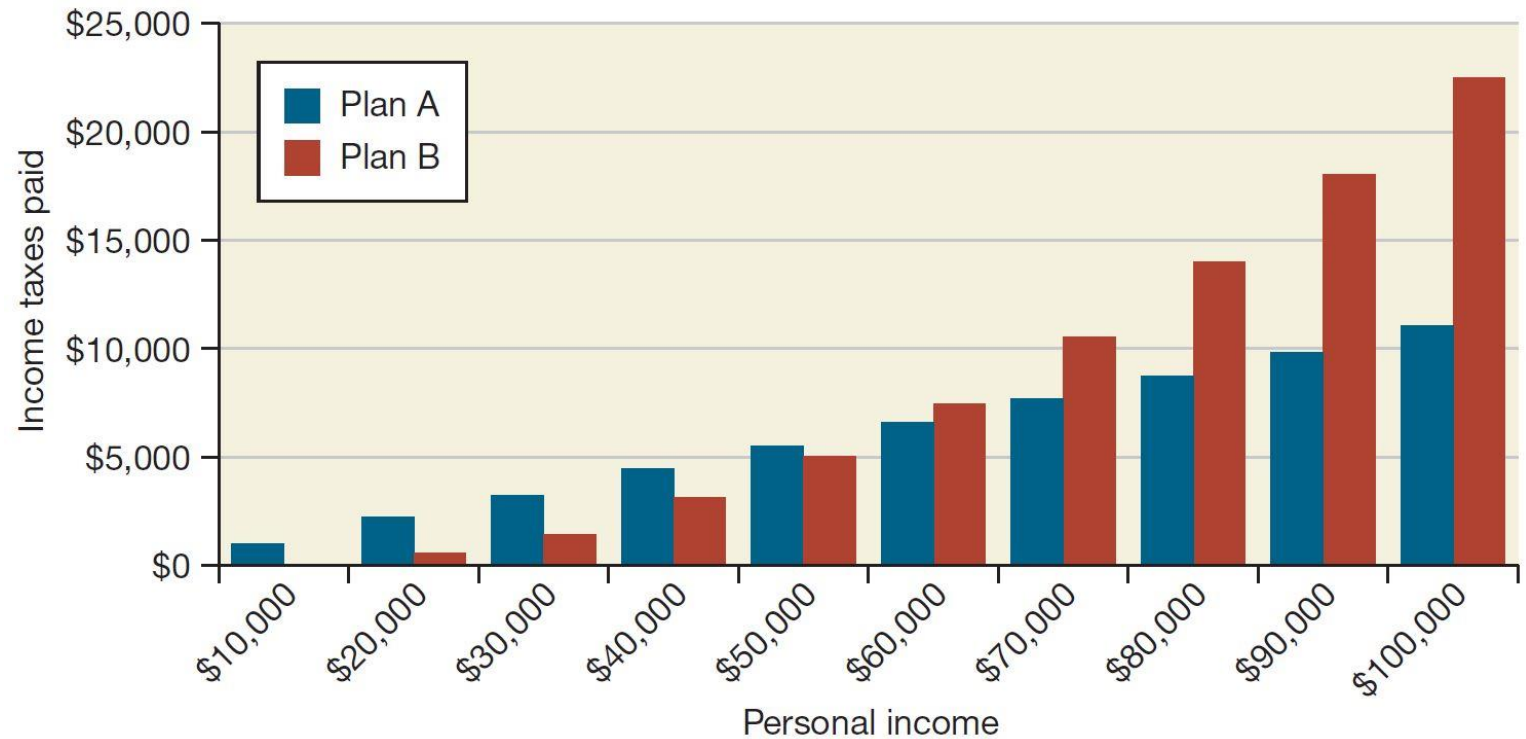


Rawls's Difference Principle

2. Any social and economic inequalities must

Be associated with positions that everyone has **a fair and equal opportunity to achieve**

Be to the **greatest benefit of the least-advantaged** members of society (the difference principle)



Plan A is a flat tax, where each citizen pays the same percentage of their income in taxes

Plan B (progressive income tax) does not treat every citizen equally, but the inequality is justified under Rawls's difference principle because it is of the greatest benefit to the most disadvantaged.

DVD Store Scenario

- Bill owns chain of DVD stores
- Collects information about purchases/rentals from customers
 - Customer A rents Disney movies, therefore highly likely to have kids
- Constructs **profiles** of customers
 - Who owns a pet, who cares for an infant, etc.
- Sells **profiles** to direct marketing firms
- Some customers happy to receive more mail order catalogs; others unhappy at increase in “junk mail”

Evaluation (Social Contract Theory) (1 of 2)

- Consider rights of Bill, customers, and mail order companies.
- Does customer have right to expect name, address to be kept confidential?
- If customer purchases something from Bill, who owns information about transaction?

Are our names and addresses confidential? (NO)

Maricopa County Assessor's Office
Home FAQ Contact Us Help Version 3.4

Feature Information

(1 of 1) Clear ?

501-50-001C

Owner Information

Owner Name:		THE CUBES AT GLENDALE BUILDING B LLC
Property Address:	15401 W NORTHERN AVE LUKE AIR FORCE BASE 85309	
Mailing Address:	15401 W NORTHERN AVE LUKE AIR FORCE BASE AZ USA 85309	
Deed Number:	20220722392	
Sale Date:	09/01/2022	
Sale Price:	\$21,776,297	

Property Information

Lat/Long:	33.549626, -112.388978	
S/T/R:	5 2N 1W	
Jurisdiction:	GLENDALE	
Zoning:	PAD	
PUC:	0014	
Lot Size (sq ft):	3,350,313.00	
MCR #:		
Subdivision:		
Lot #:		
Floor:	1	
Construction Year:		
Living Space (sq ft):		

Valuation Information

Tax Year:	2023	2022
FCV:	\$ 16,437,000	\$ 786,222
LPV:	\$ 7,725,390	\$ 428,205
Legal Class:	2.R	2.R

0.6mi
 -112.378166 33.531287 Degrees

Search By

Using the Mouse
What I Know
Buffer
Results

Step 1: Select what to search: Clear Fields

Parcels

Step 2: Select what to search for:

a Parcel Number (APN)

Step 3: Enter Parcel Number (APN):

(ex. 13275013 or 132-75-013)

Search

☐ Check to search only in current view
****Results are limited to 1000 records.**

Evaluation (Social Contract Theory) (2 of 2)

- If Bill and customer have **equal rights** to information, Bill did nothing wrong to sell information.
- If customers have **the right to expect** name and address or transaction to be confidential **without giving permission**, then Bill was wrong to sell information without asking for permission.
 - European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)
 - <https://gdpr.eu/what-is-gdpr/>
 - Will discuss in detail when we discuss online privacy

Case for Social Contract Theory

- Framed in **language of rights**
 - A bit more of a “western” thing, concept of individual rights is powerful and attractive
- Explains why people act in self-interest in absence of common agreement
 - Tragedy of *the commons* (England 1830s) (Shepherds are jerks!)
 - Medieval times: sheep overgraze the shared grazing resource for villages
 - Shepherds didn't have incentive to prevent their sheep from overgrazing, since if anyone else overgrazed, you were screwed
 - Establishing a legal rule and means of enforcing it prevents this from happening
- Provides clear analysis of certain citizen Vs government problems
 - **Why okay for government to deprive criminals of certain rights**
 - **Committing a crime forfeits ones right to move freely in society**
 - **Why civil disobedience can be morally right action**
 - **Committing a crime in the interest of the **difference principle****
 - *“I can steal in order to feed hungry children”*

Case Against Social Contract Theory

- No one signed a social contract explicitly!
 - Assumed under national identity
- Some actions have multiple characterizations
 - DVD store scenario - multiple entities have sometimes contradictory rights
 - Right to privacy vs right to life – abortion
 - Negative right (right to privacy, you can't govern what someone can do with their body)
 - Another negative right (you can't kill someone, force them to... be dead)
 - Is a woman's right to privacy (ability to govern her own body) more important than a child's potential life?
- May unjustly treat people incapable of upholding contract
 - Rising property taxes due to growth
 - <https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/king-county-property-taxes-to-rise-616-percent-overall/>
 - Drug addicts who steal... do we have a moral obligation to help the mentally ill? Or an obligation to punish those who would break the social contract?
- **Conclusion: Despite weaknesses, a workable theory**

Ethical Theory Scoreboard

NOT WORKABLE

- Subjective Relativism
- Cultural Relativism
- Divine Command Theory
- Ethical Egoism

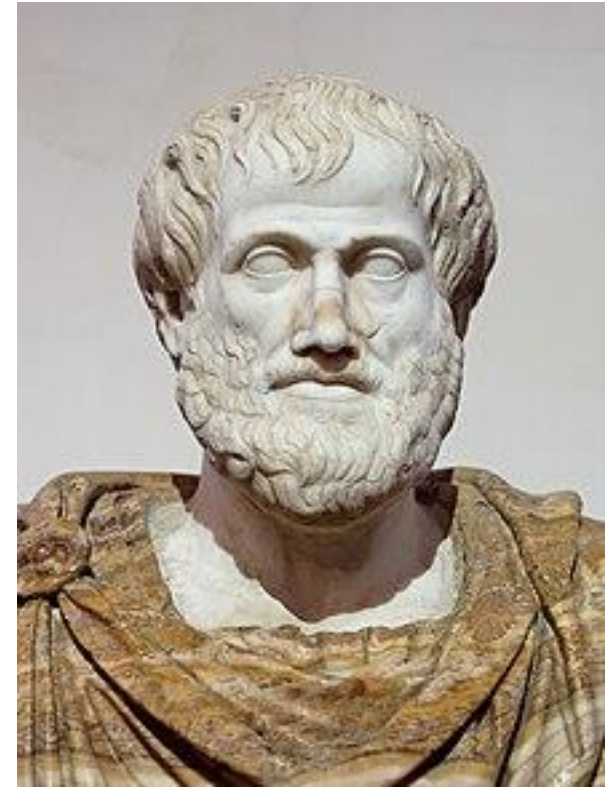
WORKABLE

- Kantianism
- Act Utilitarianism
- Rule Utilitarianism
- Social Contract Theory

2.10 Virtue Ethics

Critique of Enlightenment Theories

- Kantianism, utilitarianism, social contract theory ignore important moral considerations
 - moral education
 - moral wisdom
 - family and social relationships
 - role of emotions
- Virtue ethics
 - Can be traced back to ancient Greece
 - **arete**, virtue, excellence: reaching highest potential
 - [Aristotle](#)'s **Nicomachean Ethics** (4th century BC)



Virtues and Vices

- Two types of virtue
 - intellectual virtues: virtues associated with reasoning and truth
 - (not important for this framework though)
 - **moral virtues**: virtues of character (e.g., honesty)
 - (yup, we care about these)
- Moral virtues
 - developed by habitually performing right action
 - deep-seated character traits
 - disposition to act in a certain way **and feel** in a certain way

Living out the virtue of Honesty

- “An honest person’s reasons and choices with respect to honest and dishonest actions reflect her views about honesty, truth, and deception... Valuing honesty as she does, she chooses, where possible to work with honest people, to have honest friends, to bring up her children to be honest. She disapproves of, dislikes, deplores dishonesty, is not amused by certain tales of chicanery, despises or pities those who succeed through deception rather than thinking they have been clever, is unsurprised, or pleased (as appropriate) when honesty triumphs, is shocked or distressed when those near and dear to her do what is dishonest and so on”

Hursthouse, Rosalind and Glen Pettigrove, "Virtue Ethics", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2023 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.),
URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/ethics-virtue/>>



Aristotle on Happiness



According to Aristotle, happiness derives from living a life of virtue. You acquire moral virtues by repeating the appropriate acts.

Summary of Virtue Ethics

A *right action* is an action that a *virtuous person*, acting in character, would do in the same circumstances.

A *virtuous person* is a person who possesses and lives out the *virtues*.

The *virtues* are those *character traits* human beings need in order to *flourish and be truly happy*.

Vices

- Vices are opposite of virtues
- Vice: a character trait that prevents a human being from flourishing or being truly happy
 - Excess vs. Deficiency
- **Often, a virtue is situated between two vices**
 - *Courage* between *cowardliness* and *rashness* (excess, or lack, of fear)
 - *Generosity* between *stinginess* and *prodigality* (excess, or lack, of hoarding)

How do we walk the balance between vices, and live virtuously?

Moral (practical) Wisdom!

“Quite generally, given that good intentions are intentions to act well or “do the right thing”, we may say that **practical wisdom** is the knowledge or understanding that enables its possessor... to do just that, in any given situation. The detailed specification of what is involved in such knowledge or understanding has not yet appeared in the literature, but some aspects of it are becoming well known... [applying action-guiding rules] requires **situational appreciation—the capacity to recognize, in any particular situation, those features of it that are morally salient**. This brings out two aspects of practical wisdom.”

- “One is that it characteristically comes only with **experience of life**”
- “The second is the practically wise agent’s capacity to recognize some features of a situation as **more important** than others”

Moral (practical) Wisdom means paying attention to context!

- A friend has invited you over for a home-cooked meal. After trying the dishes, you're not sure that your friend is a very good cook. The food is tolerable, but pretty bland. They've thrown this dinner together because they need a distraction from a recent breakup. Your friend is fragile right now, and really needs a shoulder to lean on. Should you let them know that you didn't like their cooking?
- A friend is pursuing a degree as a performance musician. They're very excited about their program and they talk to you about it often. However, they're not making the best marks, and it's clear they're not putting in enough practice to succeed. If they fail any more classes they may get kicked out of school. Do you break the truth to them that they should probably switch majors?
- Moral wisdom is the ability to understand the context of a situation and make moral decisions, even if those decisions conflict with virtues

Scenario

- Josh and Matt are students in a BSCS program at a small university
- Both come from same small town ~200 miles from the university
- Matt usually drives both of them home and back during holidays
 - Matt never asks Josh for gas-money, Josh never raises the issue himself
- **Matt is known for being honest, trustworthy, and hard-working**
- Senior year capstone project – on same team
- Matt's father dies suddenly – Matt becomes uninterested in school
- Matt does bare minimum to satisfy project specs, but his code is so bad that his team rewrites it for every milestone
- Josh and his teammates can't convince Matt to take the project more seriously
- Final presentation – peer grading
 - Matt requests Josh to write a good review in light of family emergency
 - Josh feels obligated towards Matt (see above)
- What should Josh do?

Scenario

- Josh is an **honest** person, and doesn't want to lie about Matt's performance
- However, Josh feels indebted towards Matt, particularly for the free rides
- Josh also feels compassion toward Matt, who lost his father
- Josh realizes that he could have done the right thing earlier
 - He took advantage of Matt's generosity (gas money?)
 - He also didn't reach out to Matt about his father's death
 - Matt's bad performance was **totally out of character** for him!
 - Josh and his teammates could have spoken to the professor
- Josh concludes that he must be truthful with the professor about Matt's performance
- However, Josh will give the professor a full accounting of the situation; Josh will be honest about his failure to respond earlier
 - (and hopefully will tell the professor that this behavior is out of character for Matt)

Case for Virtue Ethics

- It often makes more sense to focus on virtues than obligations, rights, or consequences
 - Human lives are more than rules and numbers
- Personal relationships can be morally relevant to decision making
 - The utility of donating \$100 to charity is probably greater than buying a friend a fantastic gift!
 - Other frameworks (Kantianism, Social Contract, Utility) treat all human beings as equals
 - We take emotions and connections into account when living out our virtues
- Recognizes our moral decision-making skills **develop over time**
 - It takes time to learn and live out the virtues
 - Making mistakes doesn't automatically make us immoral
 - [6 year-old shoots teacher in Virginia](#) (is this kid... evil?)
- With this theory there are no irresolvable moral dilemmas
 - “Do the right thing, always!”
 - Different virtues tug in different directions, but **moral wisdom** allows us to choose correctly
- **Emotions play an important role in living a moral life**
 - Humans are not dispassionate calculating machines

Case Against Virtue Ethics

- Reasonable people may disagree on character traits needed for human flourishing
 - (not to mention, moral wisdom!)
 - Not as powerful as Kantianism, rule utilitarianism, and social contract, which identify universal moral truths
- Cannot use virtue ethics to guide government policy
 - Focus on the agent instead of the act or consequence of the act
 - Should we build this curvy stretch of highway?
 - Difficult (maybe not impossible?) to apply “a right action is one that a virtuous person would do”
- Virtue ethics undermines attempts to hold people responsible for their bad actions
 - Places more importance on “conditioning” than on individual to assume responsibilities for their actions
 - Growing up in a family of racists, fundamentalist religions with bad practices, etc
 - “We’re all trying to be better people!”... said the guy eating baby jerky
- **Conclusion: Despite weaknesses, virtue ethics a workable theory**

Ethical Theory Scoreboard

NOT WORKABLE

- Subjective Relativism
- Cultural Relativism
- Divine Command Theory
- Ethical Egoism

WORKABLE

- Kantianism
- Act Utilitarianism
- Rule Utilitarianism
- Social Contract Theory
- Virtue Ethics

2.11 Comparing Workable Ethical Theories

Ethical Objectivism vs Relativism

- Ethical objectivism
 - Morality has an existence outside the human mind
- Relativism
 - Morality is a human invention
- Divine command theory, ethical egoism, Kantianism, utilitarianism, social contract theory, and virtue ethics examples of ethical objectivism
 - Divine command theory
 - Morality comes from God
 - Ethical Egoism, Kantianism, Utilitarianism, Social Contract, Virtue Ethics
 - Morality is discovered via logical reasoning based on facts and commonly held beliefs
 - However, ethical egoism doesn't concern itself with others when determining right from wrong

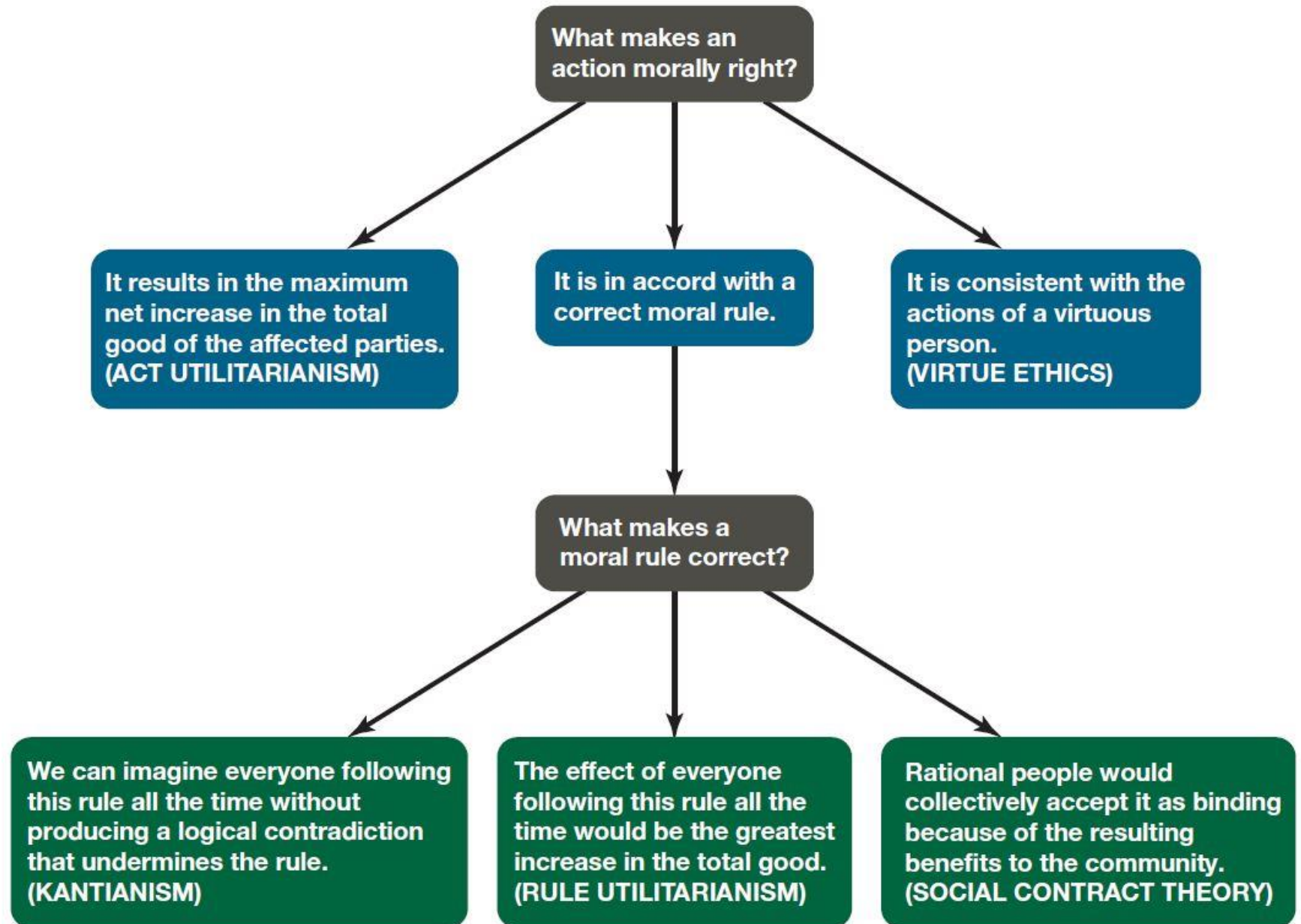
Workable Ethical Theories

- We seek theories with these characteristics:
 - Based on the ethical point of view
 - Objective moral principles developed using logical reasoning based on facts and commonly held values
- Workable ethical theories
 - Kantianism
 - Act and rule utilitarianism
 - Social contract theory
 - Virtue ethics

Comparing Workable Ethical Theories

Granular/micro-scale:
we get into the dirty
work of examining
individual actions

Broad/macro-scale:
we compare actions
against moral rules



2.12 Morality of Breaking the Law

Social Contract Theory Perspective

- Everyone in society bears certain burdens in order to receive certain benefits
- Legal system supposed to guarantee people's rights are protected
- Everything else being equal, we should be law-abiding
- **Should only break law if compelled to follow a higher-order moral obligation**

Law and Social Contract Theory



According to social contract theory, we have a prima facie (self-evident) obligation to obey the law.

Kantian Perspective

- Everyone wants to be treated justly
- Imagine rule: “I may break a law I believe to be unjust”
- If everyone acted according to this rule, then laws would be subverted
- **Contradiction: Cannot both wish to be treated justly and allow laws to be subverted**

Rule Utilitarian Perspective

- What would be consequences of people ignoring laws they felt to be unjust?
- Beneficial consequence: Happiness of people who are doing what they please
- Harmful consequences: Harm to people directly affected by lawless actions, general loss of respect for laws, increased burden on criminal justice system
- **Harms greater than benefits**

Act Utilitarian Perspective

- **Possible to conceive of situations where benefits of breaking law exceed harms**
- Suppose give penniless, bedridden friend copy of CD
- Friend benefits by \$15 (value of CD)
- I benefit by \$10 (satisfaction of helping friend)
- Harms of \$0 (no lost sale, no police involvement)
- With \$25 of benefit and \$0 of harm, action is determined to be good

Summary

Insights Offered by Various Theories (1 of 2)

- Kantianism: Every person is equally valuable, and when you interact with other people you should always respect them as rational beings. **It is wrong to privilege your needs and desires over those of other people.**
- Utilitarianism: You should **consider the consequences** of an action before deciding whether it's right or wrong.
- Social contract theory: We should **collectively promote human rights**, such as the rights to life, liberty, and property.
- Virtue ethics: You can count on a **good person** to do the **right thing at the right time in the right way**.

It's up to You

- You **can** consider duties **and** rights **and** consequences **and** virtues when making moral decisions
- Ultimately, you have to decide:
 - What kind of person do I want to be?
 - What kind of world do I want to live in?

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