

Aspetos Socio Profissionais da Informática (Informatics and Society)

A Short Introduction to Ethical Theories

Departamento de Informática da
FCT/UNL

Lecture Outline

- Why Ethical theories are needed
- Workable and unworkable ethical theories
- Some examples of workable ethical theories
 - Kantianism
 - Act Utilitarianism Theory
 - Social Contract Theory
- Morality of Breaking the Law
- Summary and Conclusions

Based on slides made available by book publisher Pearson Education to instructors adopting book by Michael J. Quinn "Ethics for the Information Age", as basic bibliography

Slides almost identical to a subset of
those made available by Pearson to
instructors using

Michael J. Quinn "Ethics for the
Information Age"

Ethics is Needed Since we Live in Society

- Living in a Society requires the cooperation among individuals and help to promote the common good and maximize the benefits
- However, people in a community also compete
- When competing, we are deciding how to divide benefits among ourselves

Morality = the rules used in a certain society describing what people can do, or should do, or must do, in several situations

Ethical Theories

- Ethics is the philosophical study of morality, a rational examination of the people moral beliefs and of people behavior
- Ethical theories allows one to give a logical justification / explanation why a certain decision is right, while others can believe it is wrong

I try to persuade them that my decision is the right one

Unworkable Ethical Theories

- Divine Command Theories ("My religion ...")
- Subjectivism Relativism ("What's right for you may not be right for me")
- Cultural Relativism ("It is arrogant for one society to judge another")
- Ethical Egoism ("Everyone maximizes is gain")

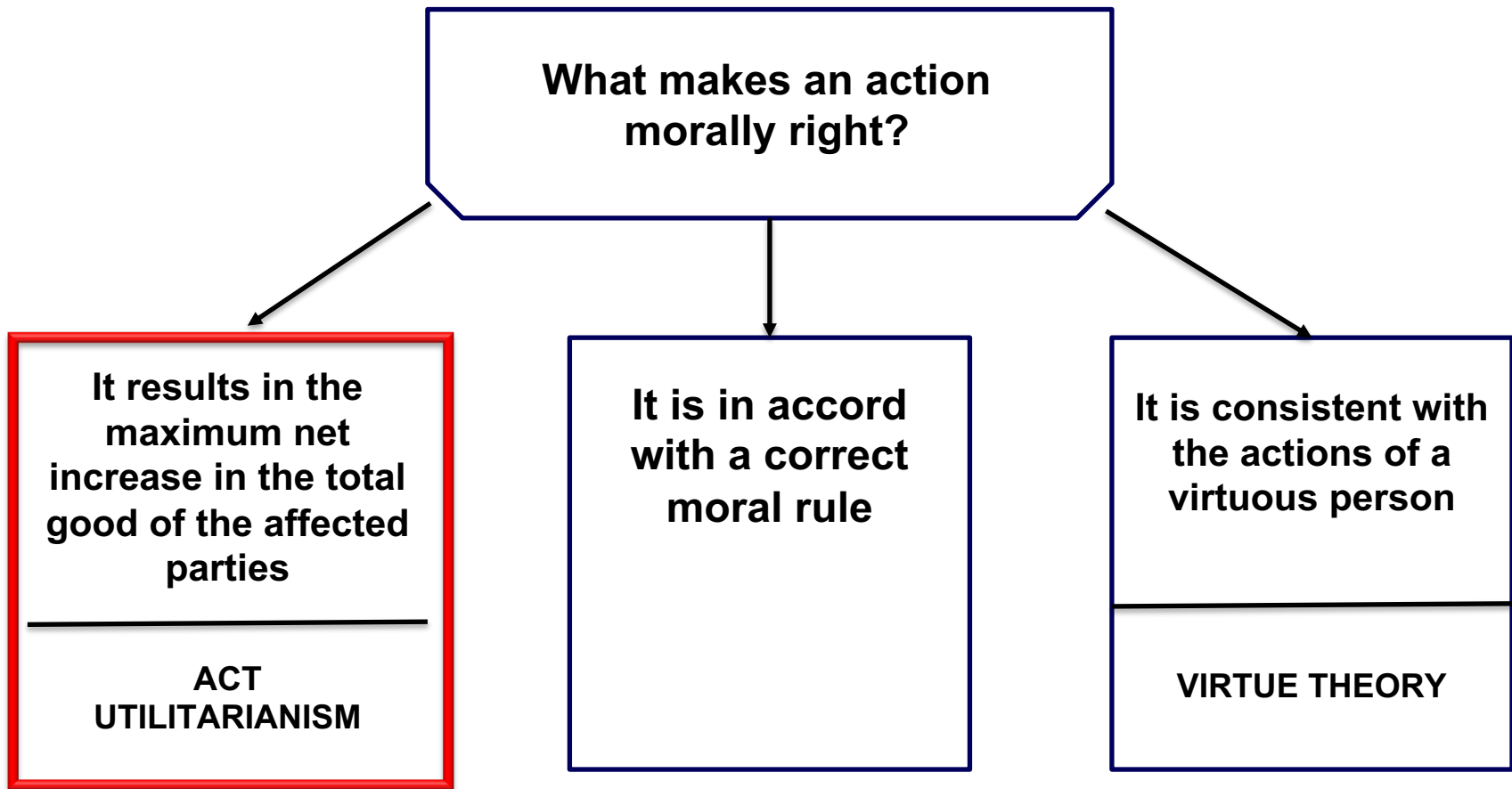
Warning: we are mostly dealing with Western Ethical Theories and ignoring Chinese and Indian Theories

Workable Ethical Theories

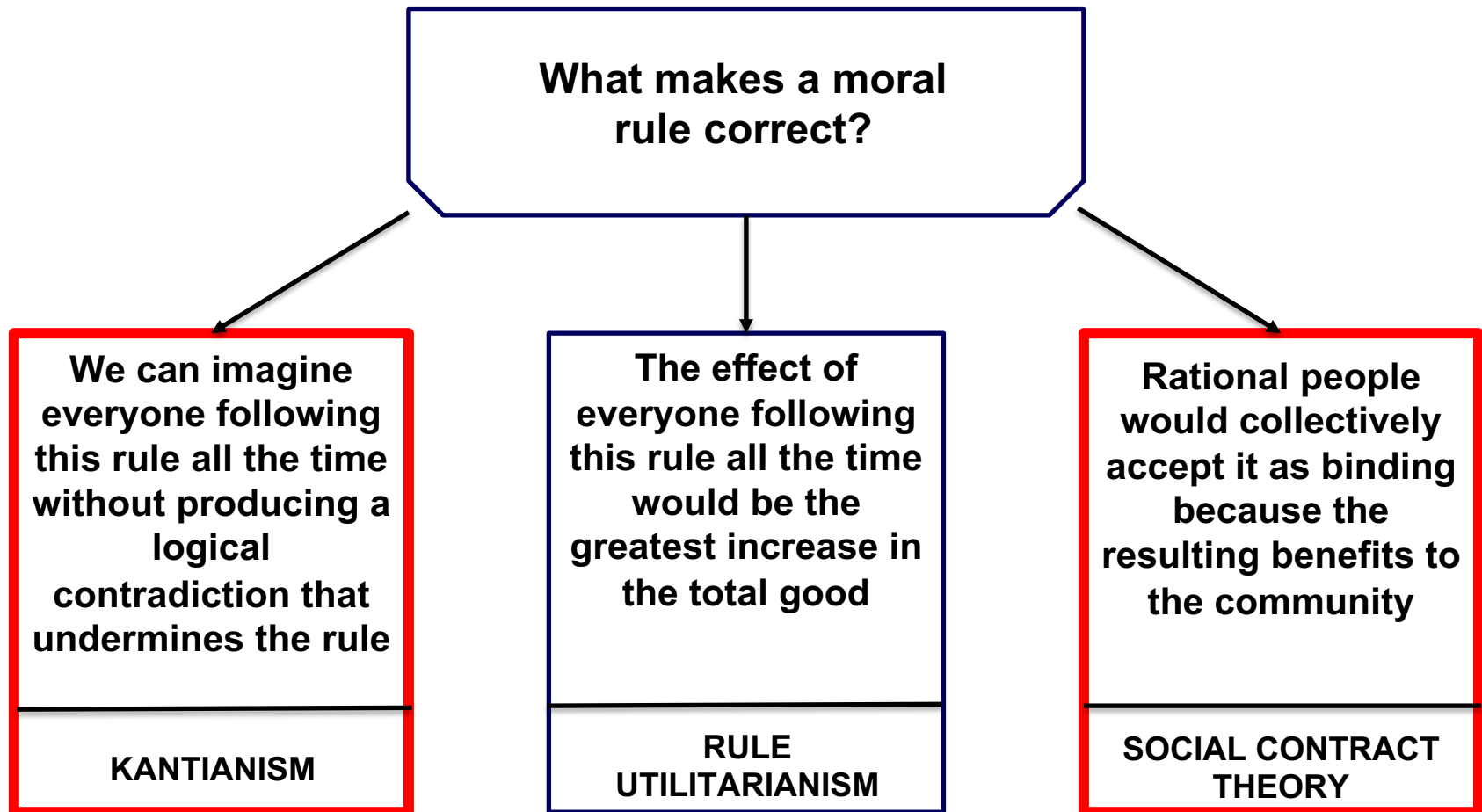
Something is good if:

- it is consistent with a moral rule
- it is what a virtuous person would do – Virtue Theory
- it maximizes usefulness – Utilitarianism
- it is consistent with a rule that maximizes usefulness – Rule Utilitarianism
- if everybody chooses to the same, it will not lead to a logical contradiction that would undermine this choice (Kantianism)
- it is in accordance with the Social Contract – Social Contract Theory

Action Rule Workable Ethical Theories



Moral Rule Workable Ethical Theories



2.6 Kantianism (Séc. XVII)

Critical Importance of Good Will

- Good will: the desire to do the right thing
- Immanuel Kant: Only thing in the world that is good without qualification is a good will
- Reason should cultivate desire to do right thing

What we want to do is of no importance. Our focus should be on what we ought to do - **Our dutifulness**

E. Kant Moral Rules

- The moral value of an action depends on the underlying moral rule
- Our actions should be grounded in the appropriate moral rule
- A categorical imperative is an unconditional rule: a rule that always applies, regardless of the circumstances
- Only a categorical imperative may be a moral rule

E. Kant Moral Rules

- Moral actions follow from the right moral principles
- How do we know if our moral principles are good ones?
- Hypothetical imperatives are conditional, rather than categorical / absolute
- All moral rules must rest on a categorical imperative (CI)
- To find out whether a moral principle is ok to act from, you see if it is compatible with the Categorical Imperative (CI)

Categorical Imperative (1st Formulation)

Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws

Application

- **Step 1** : Formulate a sincere and rational maxim (a subjective principle of action that states what you propose to do, and why)
- **Step 2** : Universalize the maxim to everyone, past, present and future. (everyone, as if by a law of nature, does A in C in order to achieve E)
- **Step 3** : Imagine the world that would result from conjoining all the laws of physics, psychology, sociology, etc. with the law you made in Step 2
- **Step 4** : Test the maxim

Continuation

- The contradiction in conception test - In the social world of (3) would it be possible to achieve your end by means of the action you proposed in 1?
- The Contradiction in the Will test - Could I consistently will that this social world actually exists?
- If a maxim of action fails the CI tests, it is NOT permissible to act on that maxim! AND that means that not to do that thing is a moral duty.

Illustration

- 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 & break promises
- Everyone breaking promises would make promises unbelievable, contradicting desire to have promise believed
- The rule is flawed. The answer is "No."

A Quick Check

- When evaluating a proposed action, reverse roles
- What would you think if that person did the same thing to you?
- Negative reaction → evidence that your will to do that action violates the Categorical Imperative

Categorical Imperative (2nd Formulation)

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

This is usually an easier formulation to work with than the first formulation of the Categorical Imperative.

Kant: Wrong to Use Another Person Solely as a Means to an End

Plagiarism Scenario

- Carla
 - Single mother
 - Works full time
 - Takes two evening courses/semester
- History class
 - Requires more work than normal
 - Carla earning an "A" on all work so far
 - Carla doesn't have time to write final report
- Carla purchases report; submits it as her own work

Kantian Evaluation (1st Formulation)

- Carla wants credit for plagiarized report
- Rule: "You may claim credit for work performed by someone else"
- If rule universalized, reports would no longer be credible indicator's of student's knowledge, and professors would not give credit for reports
- Proposal moral rule is self-defeating
- It is wrong for Carla to turn in a purchased report

Kantian Evaluation (2nd Formulation)

- Carla submitted another person's work as her own
- She attempted to deceive professor
- She treated professor as a means to an end
 - End: passing the course
 - Means: manipulate professor
- What Carla did was wrong

Case for Kantianism

- Aligns with common moral concern: "What if everyone acted that way?"
- Produces universal moral guidelines
- Treats all persons as moral equals

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
- Kantianism allows no exceptions to perfect duties
- Despite weaknesses, a workable ethical theory

2.7 Act Utilitarianism

Principle of Utility

- Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill (Séc. XVIII)
- An action is good if its benefits exceeds its harms
- An action is bad if its harms exceed its benefits
- Utility: tendency of an object to produce happiness or prevent unhappiness for an individual or a community
- Happiness = advantage = benefit = good = pleasure
- Unhappiness = disadvantage = cost = evil = pain

Principle of Utility

An action is right (or wrong) to the extent that it increases (or decreases) the total happiness of the affected parties.

While analysing a decision, compare the sum of benefit it produces to the sum of harm it causes

Act Utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism

- Morality of an action has nothing to do with intent - Focuses on the consequences
- A consequentialist theory

- Act utilitarianism

- Add up change in happiness of all affected beings
- $\text{Sum} > 0$, action is good
- $\text{Sum} < 0$, action is bad

- Right action to take: one that maximizes the sum

Bentham: Weighting Pleasure/Pain

- Intensity
- Duration
- Certainty, confidence
- Propinquity, nearness
- Purity, clearness
- Extent, scope

Highway Routing Scenario

- State may replace a curvy stretch of highway
- New highway segment 1 mile shorter
- 150 houses would have to be removed
- Some wildlife habitat would be destroyed

Evaluation

- Costs

- \$20 million to compensate homeowners
- \$10 million to construct new highway
- Lost wildlife habitat worth \$1 million

- Benefits

- \$39 million savings in automobile driving costs

- Conclusion

- Benefits exceed costs
- Building highway a good action

Case for Act Utilitarianism

- Focuses on happiness
- Down-to-earth (practical)
- Comprehensive

Case Against Act Utilitarianism

- Unclear whom to include in calculations and how far out into the future to consider
- Too much work
- Ignores our innate sense of duty
- We cannot predict consequences with certainty
 - some calculations are hard, e.g. environment damage
- Susceptible to the problem of moral luck
- Overall, a workable ethical theory

Limits of These Theories

- For the sake of generality we can try to address the previous examples using another theory
 - Using Utilitarianism to analyse the situation “Can a person in dire straits make a promise with the intention of breaking it later?”
 - Using Utilitarianism to analyse the situation “Carla’s credit for plagiarized report”
 - Using Kantianism to to analyse the situation “Highway Routing Scenario”