Chapter 2:
Introduction to Ethics

COMP422 Ethics and Professional Issues in Computing
Dr. Patrick Pang

Based on
Ethics for the Information Age (5th Ed.)
by
Michael J. Quinn

澳門理工學院
Instituto Politécnico de Macau
Macao Polytechnic Institute

Chapter Overview

- Introduction
- Review of eight ethical theories
- Comparing workable ethical theories
- Morality of breaking the law

2.1 Introduction

We Live in Communities

(London, England at night from space)


Courtesy of NASA

The Ethical Point of View

- Most everyone shares "core values", desiring:
  - Life
  - Happiness
  - Ability to accomplish goals
- Two ways to view world
  - Selfish point of view: consider only own self and its 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 the good of members over time
- Morality
  - A society's rules of conduct
  - What people ought / ought not to do in various situations
- Ethics
  - Rational examination of morality
  - Evaluation of people's behavior

Analogy Showing Difference between Morality and Ethics
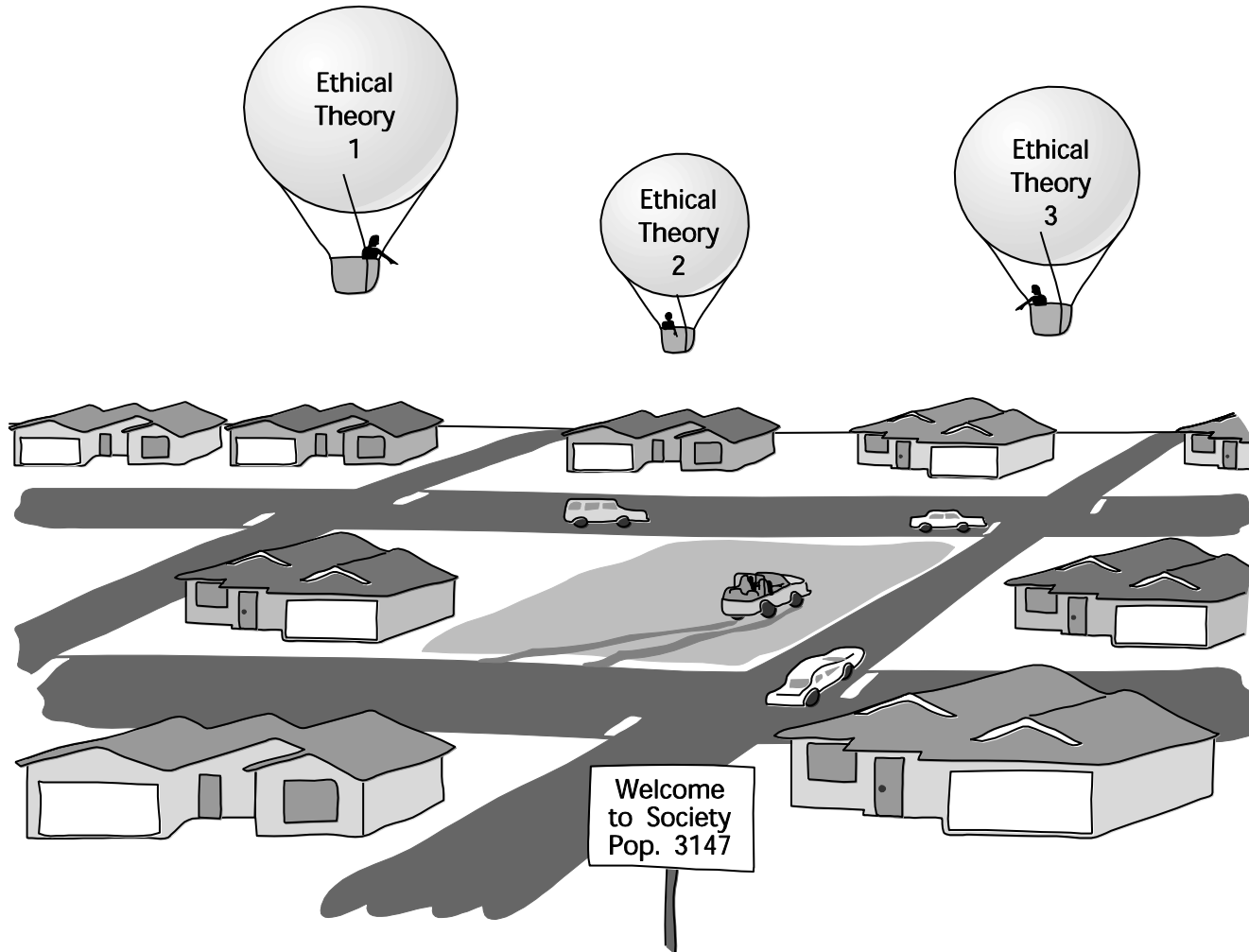
Why Study Ethics?

- Ethics: a way to decide the best thing to do

- New problems accompany new technologies

- "Common wisdom" may not exist for novel situations brought about by new technologies

Scenario 1 (P. 54)

- Did Alexis do anything wrong?

- Who benefited from Alexis's course of action?

- Who was hurt by Alexis's course of action?

- Did Alexis have an unfair advantage over her high school classmates?

- Would any of your answers change if it turns out Alexis did not win a college scholarship after all?

- Are there better ways Alexis could have achieved her objective?

- What additional information, if any, would help you answer the previous question?

Scenario 2 (P. 55)

- Did the anti-spam organization do anything wrong?
- Did the ISPs that refused to accept email from the blacklisted ISPs do anything wrong?
- Who benefited from the organization's action?
- Who was hurt by the organization's action?
- Could the organization have achieved its goals through a better course of action?
- What additional information, if any, would help you answer the previous question?

Scenario 3 (PP. 55-6)

- Did the East Dakota State Police do anything wrong?

- Who benefited from the actions of the EDSP?

- Who was harmed by the actions of the EDSP?

- What other courses of action could the EDSP have taken to achieve its objectives?

- What additional information, if any, would help you answer the previous question?

Scenario 4 (P. 56)

- Should you recommend release of the product next week?

- Who will benefit if the company follows your recommendation?

- Who will be harmed if the company follows your recommendation?

- Do you have an obligation to any group of people that may be affected by your decision?

- What additional information, if any, would help you answer the previous question?

More on Ethics

- Ethics: rational, systematic analysis
  - "Doing ethics": answers need explanations
  - Explanations: facts, shared values, logic
- Ethics: voluntary, moral choices
- Workable ethical theory: produces explanations that might be persuasive to a skeptical, yet open-minded audience

Good Ethical Theory Supports Persuasive, Logical Arguments

2.2 Subjective Relativism

What Is Relativism?

- Relativism
  - No universal norms of right and wrong
  - One person can say "X is right," another can say "X is wrong," and both can be right
- Subjective relativism
  - Each person decides right and wrong for himself or herself
  - "What's right for you may not be right for me"

Case for Subjective Relativism

- Well-meaning and intelligent people disagree on moral issues (e.g. legalized abortion)

- Ethical debates are disagreeable and pointless

Case Against Subjective Relativism

- Blurs distinction between doing what you think is right and doing what you want to do

- Makes no moral distinction between the actions of different people

- SR and tolerance are two different things

- Decisions may not be based on reason

- Not a workable ethical theory

Discuss

NEWSRADIO

AUDIO: Europe calls for individual responsibility in combating COVID-19 crisis

Posted Wed 22 Dec 2021 at 5:00am, updated Wed 22 Dec 2021 at 5:33am

LISTEN
8 m

Europe calls for individual responsibility in combating COVID-19 crisis

⬇ Download 15.7 MB

The European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control says the population has a huge role to play in combating the pandemic - as several countries continue to report their highest-ever number of daily COVID infections. Before the new strain was detected the World Health Organization warned that Europe had once again become the epicentre" of the Covid pandemic and could see half a million more deaths by February. ABC NewsRadio's Thomas Oriti spoke to Dr Andrea Ammon, a German physician and director of the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control - she told ABC NewsRadio that every person has responsibility for tackling the COVID crisis.

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Scott Morrison urges 'personal responsibility' instead of mask mandates and lockdown

Australia must embrace a "culture of responsibility" that places the onus on individuals to take protective actions against COVID-19 rather than a "culture of control and mandates" by government, Prime Minister Scott Morrison says.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison says mask-wearing is recommended, but does not need to be mandated. Source: AAP

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has pushed back against the idea of more COVID-19 lockdowns and government mask mandates, urging Australians to take "personal responsibility" as concern grows about the spread of the Omicron variant ahead of end-of-year festivities.

Mr Morrison weighed into the debate over mandatory face masks on Tuesday, following a statement from the nation's Chief Medical Officer Paul Kelly on Monday urging all state and territory leaders to mandate masks in all indoor settings, citing rising case numbers for the new COVID-19 variant.

The PM said that while there is a "strong recommendation" to wear face masks in indoor settings, Australia must adopt a "culture of responsibility" that places the onus on individuals to choose to take protective actions as opposed to a "culture of control and mandates".

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 other society or at another time

Case for Cultural Relativism

- Different social contexts demand different moral guidelines

- It is arrogant for one society to judge another

Case Against Cultural Relativism

- Because two societies *do* have different moral views doesn't mean they *ought to* have different views
- It doesn't explain how moral guidelines are determined
- What if there are no cultural norms?
- It doesn't account for evolution of moral guidelines.
- It provides no way out for cultures in conflict
- Existence of many acceptable practices does not imply all practices are acceptable (many/any fallacy)
- Societies do, in fact, share certain core values
- Only indirectly based on reason
- 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 reveal God's will

- We should use holy books as moral decision-making guides

Divine Command Theory in Action

Case for Divine Command Theory

- We owe obedience to our Creator
- God is all-good and all-knowing
- God is the ultimate authority

Case Against Divine Command Theory

- Different holy books disagree
- Society is multicultural, secular
- Some modern moral problems not addressed in scripture
- "The good" ≠ "God" (equivalence fallacy)
- Based on obedience, not reason
- Not a workable ethical theory

2.5 Ethical Egoism

Definition of Ethical Egoism

- Each person should focus exclusively on his or her self-interest

- Morally right action: that action that provides self with maximum long-term benefit

- A version of this philosophy espoused by Ayn Rand, author of *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged* (P. 67)

Case for Ethical Egoism

- It is practical since we are already inclined to do what's best for ourselves

- It's better to let other people take care of themselves

- The community can benefit when individuals put their well-being first

- Other moral principles are rooted in the principle of self-interest

Case Against Ethical Egoism

- An easy moral philosophy may not be the best moral philosophy
- We know a lot about what is good for someone else
- Self-interest can lead to blatantly immoral behavior
- Other moral principles are superior to principle of self-interest
- People who take the good of others into account lead happier lives
- By definition, does not respect the ethical point of view
- Not a workable ethical theory

2.6 Kantianism

Critical Importance of Good Will

- Good will: the desire to do the right thing
- Immanuel Kant (1724-1804): Only thing in the world that is good without qualification is a good will
- Reason should cultivate desire to do right thing

Categorical Imperative (1st Formulation)

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

Illustration of 1ˢᵗ Formulation (P. 71)

- 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
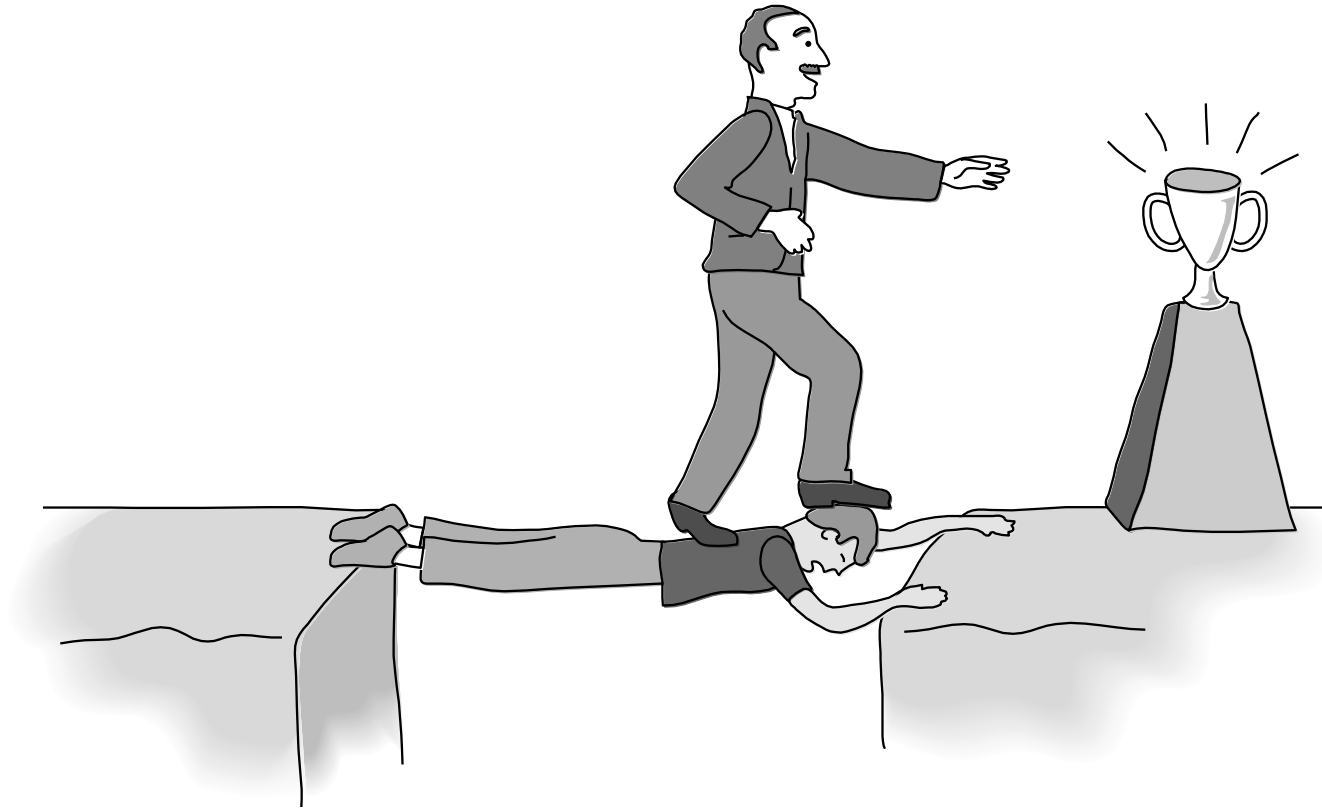
- The rule is flawed. The answer is "No."

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.

2nd Formulation of Categorical Imperative

Plagiarism Scenario (PP. 71)

- 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 and 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: professor issues grade
- What Carla did was wrong

Case for Kantianism

- Rational

- Produces universal moral guidelines

- Treats all persons as moral equals

- Workable ethical theory

Perfect and Imperfect Duties (P. 72)

- Perfect duty: duty obliged to fulfill without exception
  - Example: Telling the truth
- Imperfect duty: duty obliged to fulfill in general but not in every instance
  - Example: Helping others

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 (see P. 72 for an example)

- Despite weaknesses, a workable ethical theory
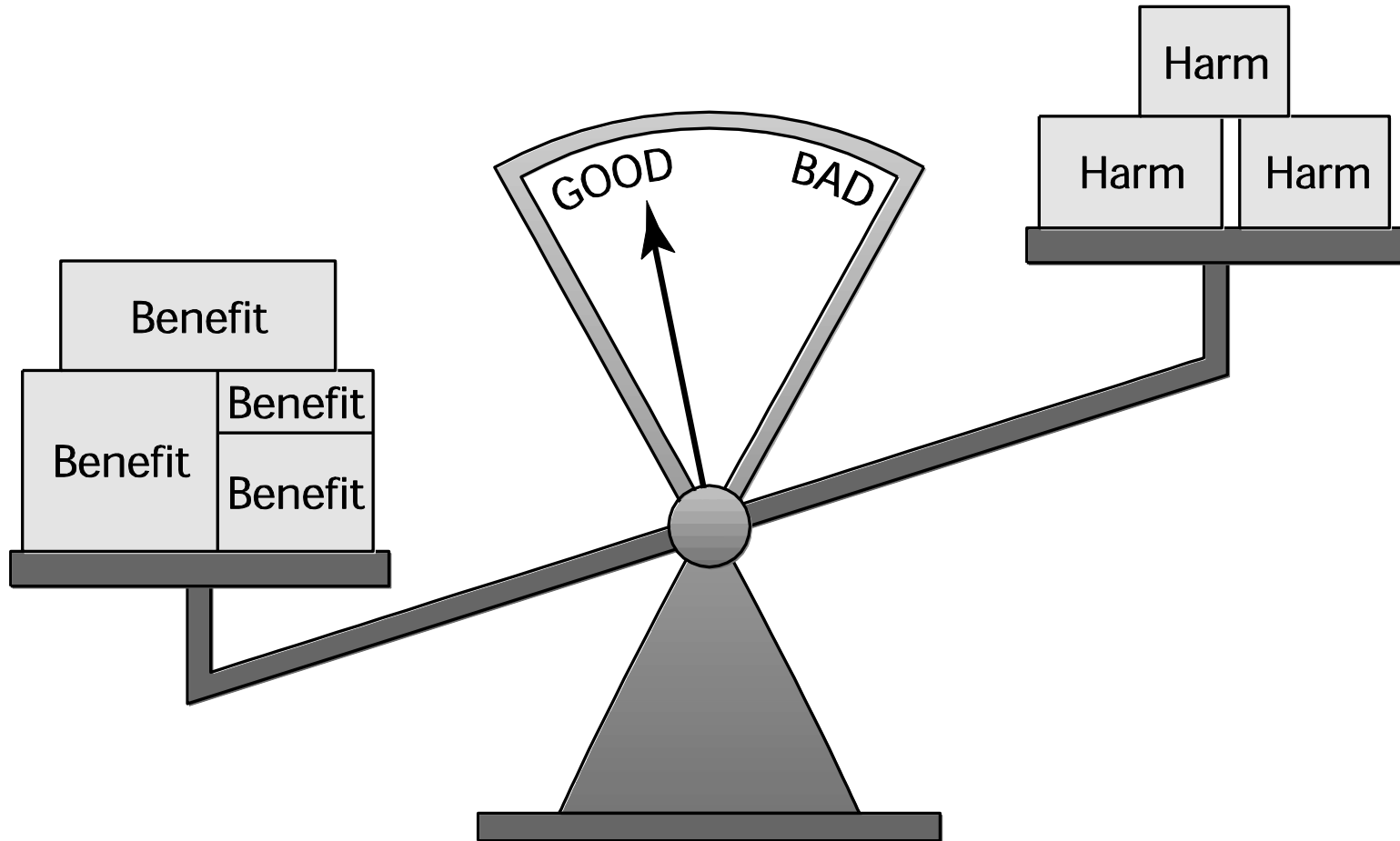
2.7 Act Utilitarianism

Principle of Utility (P.75)

- Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
- An action is good if it benefits someone
- An action is bad if it harms someone
- 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 (Greatest Happiness Principle)

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

Principle of Utility

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
  - Sum > 0, action is good
  - Sum < 0, action is bad

Highway Routing Scenario (PP. 74-75)

- 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 is a good action

Bentham: Weighing Pleasure/Pain (PP. 75)

- Intensity: magnitude of the experience

- Duration: how long the experience lasts

- Certainty: probability it will actually happen

- Propinquity: how close the experience is in space and time

- Fecundity: its ability to produce more experiences of the same kind

- Purity: extent to which pleasure is not diluted by pain, or vice versa

- Extent: number of people affected

Case for Act Utilitarianism

- Focuses on happiness
- Down-to-earth (practical)
- Comprehensive
- Workable ethical theory

Case Against Act Utilitarianism

- Unclear whom and how long to be included in calculations

- Too much work

- Ignores our innate sense of duty

- Consequences of an action cannot be predicted

- Susceptible to the problem of moral luck (see P. 77 for an example)

2.8 Rule Utilitarianism

Applying Principle of Utility to Rules

- We ought to adopt moral rules which, if followed by everyone, will lead to the greatest increase in total happiness

- Act utilitarianism applies Principle of Utility to individual actions

- Rule utilitarianism applies Principle of Utility to moral rules

Anti-Worm Scenario (P. 78)

- August 2003: Blaster worm infected thousands of Windows computers

- Soon after, Nachi worm appeared
  - Took control of vulnerable computer
  - Located and destroyed copies of Blaster
  - Downloaded software patch to fix security problem
  - Used computer as launching pad to try to "infect" other vulnerable PCs

Evaluation using Rule Utilitarianism (PP. 78-79)

- Proposed rule: If I can write a helpful worm that removes a harmful worm from infected computers and shields them from future attacks, I should do so
- Who would benefit
  - People who do not keep their systems updated
- Who would be harmed
  - People who use networks
  - People who's computers are invaded by buggy anti-worms
  - System administrators
- Conclusion: Harm outweighs benefits. Releasing anti-worm is wrong.

Case for Rule Utilitarianism

- Not every moral decision requires performing utilitarian calculus.
- Moral rules survive exceptional situations
- Avoids the problem of moral luck
- Avoids the problem of egocentrism
- Workable ethical theory

Case Against Utilitarianism <u>in General</u>

- All consequences must be measured on a single scale.
  - All units must be the same in order to do the sum
  - In certain circumstances utilitarians must quantify the value of a human life
- Utilitarianism ignores the problem of an unjust distribution of good consequences.
  - Utilitarianism does **not** mean "the greatest good of the greatest number"
  - That requires a principle of justice
  - What happens when a conflict arises between the Principle of Utility and a principle of justice?
- Despite weaknesses, both act utilitarianism and rule utilitarianism are workable ethical theories

2.9 Social Contract Theory

Basis of Social Contract Theory

- ## Thomas Hobbes (1603-1679)
  - "State of nature" (P.84)
  - We implicitly accept a social contract
    - Establishment of moral rules to govern relations among citizens
    - Government capable of enforcing these rules

- ## Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)
  - In ideal society, no one above rules
  - That prevents society from enacting bad rules

James Rachels's Definition of Social Contract Theory (P.85)

"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."

Rights and Duties

- Close correspondence between rights and duties

- Examples:
  - You have the right to life, then others have the duty or obligation not to kill you
  - If you have a right to receive health care when you are sick, then others have the duty to make sure you receive it (e.g. funding, providing doctors, etc.)

Kinds of Rights

- Negative right: A right that another can guarantee by leaving you alone

    - Example: Freedom of expression

- Positive right: A right obligating others to do something on your behalf

    - Example: Free education (others pay for it)

- Absolute right: A right guaranteed without exception

    - Example: Right to live

- Limited right: A right that may be restricted based on the circumstances

    - Example: Free activities organized by the government, depending on the budget

Correlation between Types of Rights

- Positive rights tend to be more limited
- Negative rights tends to be more absolute

John Rawls's Principles of Justice (P.86)

- 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

- 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
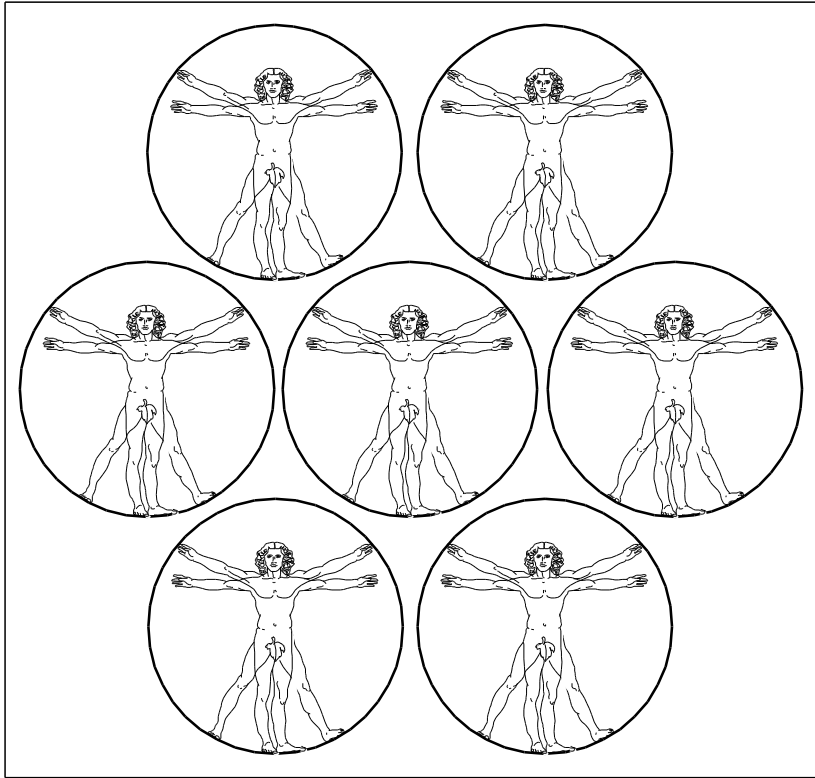
Just
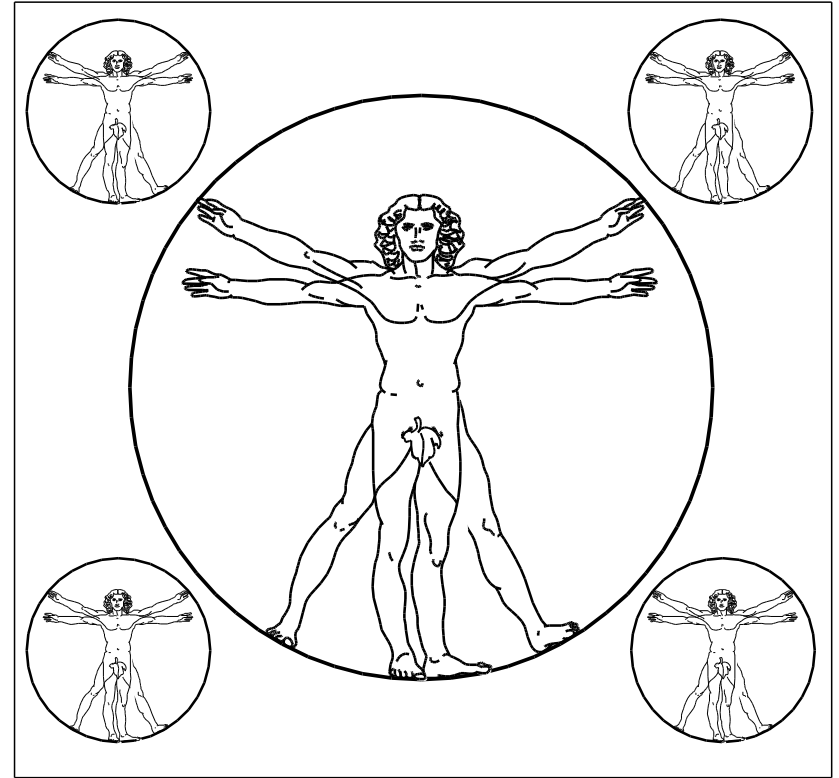
Unjust

Rawls's Difference Principle

- Social and economic inequalities must be justified
- The only way to justify a social or economic inequality is to show that its overall effect is to provide the most benefit to the least advantaged

Rawls's difference principle is illustrated by Plan B shown in the right figure. Plan B does not treat every citizen equally, but the inequality is justified because it is of greatest benefit to the most disadvantaged
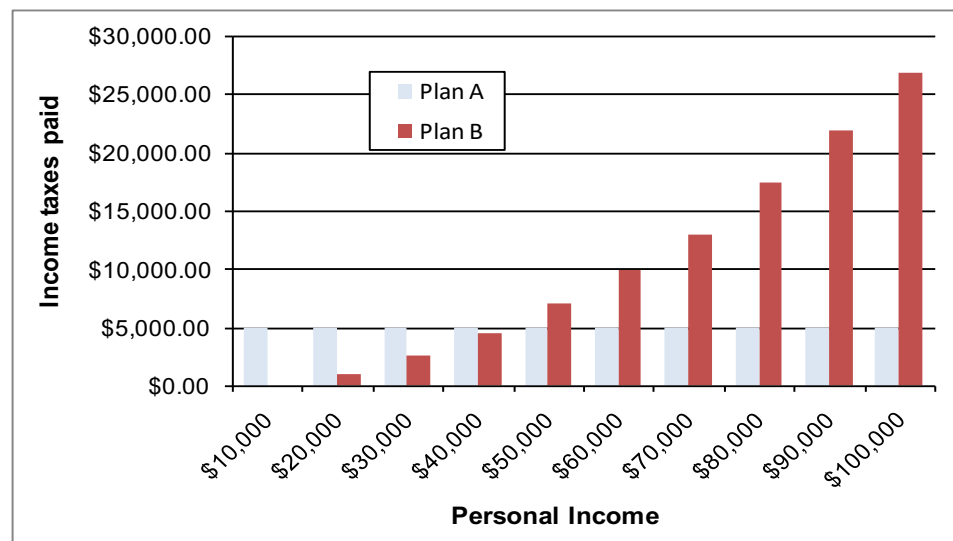
DVD Rental Scenario (P.85)

- Bill owns chain of DVD rental stores
- Collects information about rentals from customers
- Constructs profiles of customers
- 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)

- Consider rights of Bill, customers, and mail order companies.

- Does customer have right to expect name, address to be kept confidential?

- If customer rents DVD from Bill, who owns information about transaction?

- If Bill and customer have equal rights to information, Bill did nothing wrong to sell information.

- If customers have 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.

Case for Social Contract Theory

- Framed in language of rights
  - Cultures of modern countries with powerful individual rights
- Explains why people act in self-interest without common agreement
- Provides clear analysis of certain citizen/government problems
- Workable ethical theory

Case Against Social Contract Theory

- No one signed contract
- Some actions have multiple characterizations
- Conflicting rights problem
- May unjustly treat people who cannot uphold contract
- Despite weaknesses, a workable theory

2.10 Comparing Workable Ethical Theories

Objectivism vs. Relativism

- Objectivism: Morality has an existence outside the human mind

- Relativism: Morality is a human invention

- Kantianism, utilitarianism, and social contract theory are examples of objectivism

Comparing Workable Ethical Theories (P.92)

What makes an action morally right?

It results in an increase in the total good of the affected parties. (**ACT UTILITARIANISM**)

It is in accord with a correct moral rule.

What makes a moral rule correct?

We can imagine everyone following this rule all the time without producing a logical contradiction that undermines the rule. (**KANTIANISM**)

The effect of everyone following this rule all the time would be the greatest increase in the total good. (**RULE UTILITARIANISM**)

Rational people would collectively accept it as binding because of the resulting benefits to the community. (**SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY**)

All these theories take other people into consideration, and rely upon reasoning from facts and commonly held values

2.11 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

- We have a *prima facie* obligation to obey the law, i.e., everything else being equal, we should be law-abiding

- Should only break law if compelled to follow a higher-order moral obligation

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

Summary
Insights Offered by Various Theories

- Kantianism: Interactions with other people should respect them as rational beings

- Utilitarianism: You should consider the consequences of an action before deciding whether it's right or wrong

- Social contract theory: We should promote collective rights, such as the rights to life, liberty, and property

Mixing Theories

- You *can* consider duties *and* rights *and* consequences when making moral decisions

- But what will you do when you can't respect rights absolutely and still maximize the total beneficial consequences?

- Contemplation of what it means to be a person of good character leads to a discussion of virtue ethics (to be discussed in Chapter 9)