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Lecture 2

Ethical Concepts & Theories

Prepared by:
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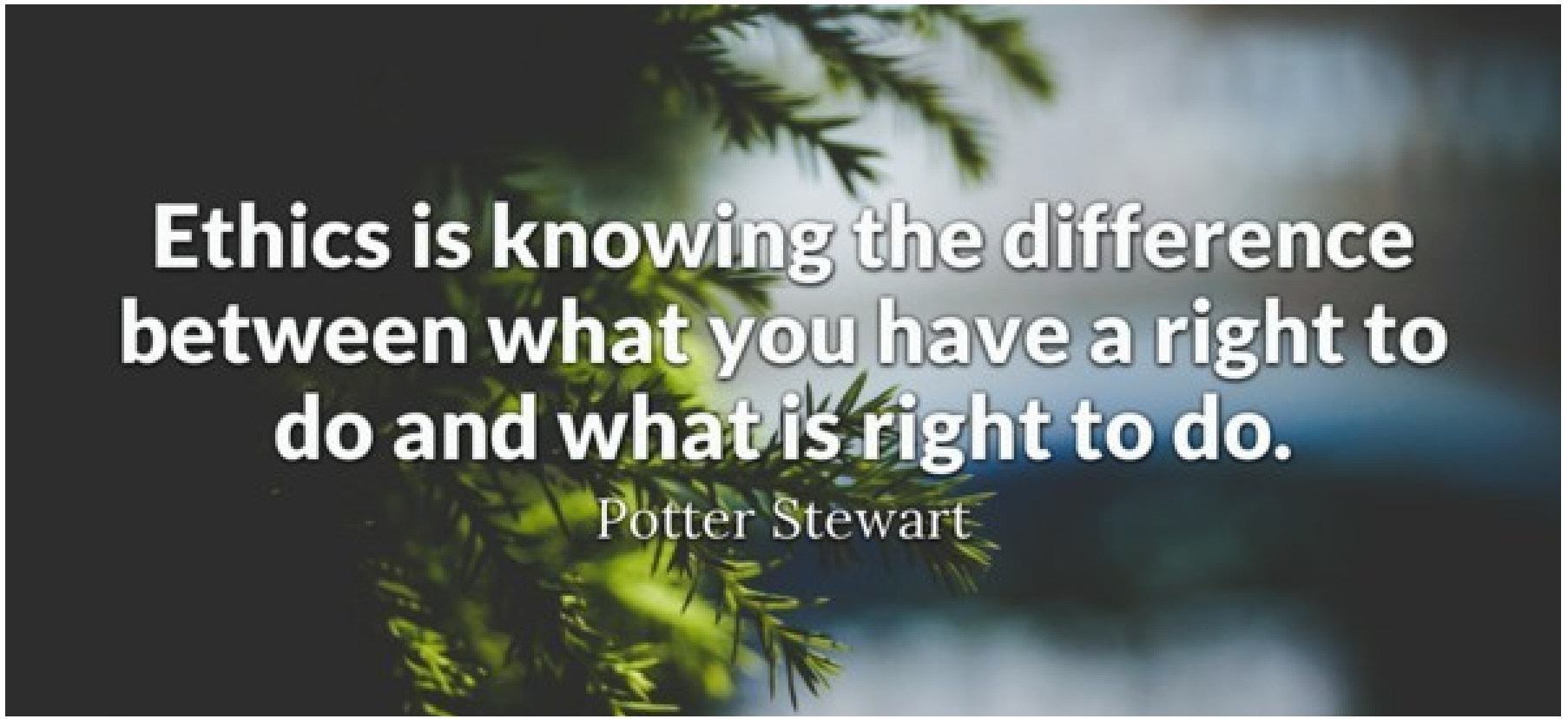
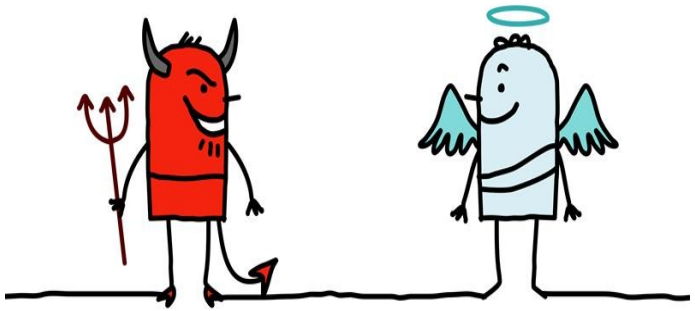

Ethics is knowing the difference between what you have a right to do and what is right to do.
Potter Stewart

Defining Terms

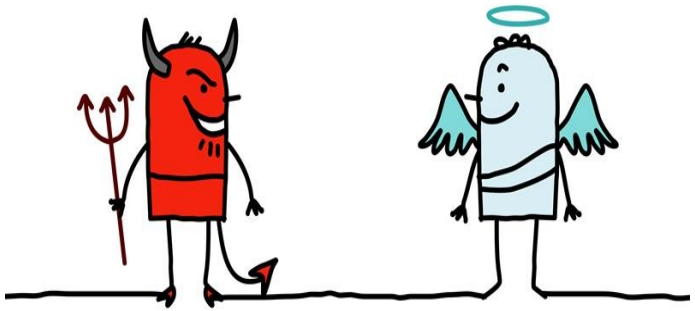
- Society
  - Association of people organized under a system of rules
  - Rules: advance the good of members over time
- Morality
  - A society's rules of conduct
  - What people ought / ought not to do in various situations
- Ethics
  - Rational examination of morality
  - Evaluation of people's behavior



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 your own self and your core values
  - Ethical point of view: respect other people and their core values

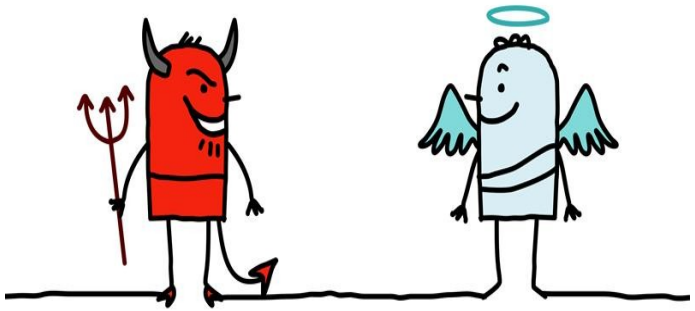


More on Ethics

- Ethics: rational, systematic analysis
  - Conclusions must be supported
  - Best explanations based on facts, shared values, logic

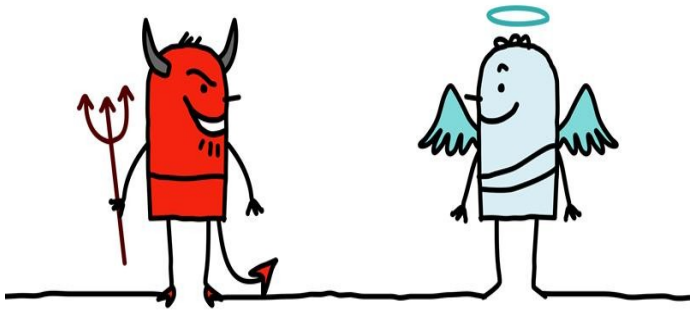
- Ethics focuses on people's voluntary, moral choices

- Workable ethical theory: produces explanations that might be persuasive to a skeptical, yet open-minded audience



Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs



Relevance of ethics to ICT

- Do good work (Aristotle)
- Plan holistically (systems theory)
- Consider end use (Aristotle)
- Evaluate both ends and means (Kant)
- Be stakeholder oriented (ISO 26000)
- Take care of the environment (ISO 26000)
- Contribute to knowledge

A Good Ethical Theory Enables You to Make Persuasive & Logical Arguments

The greatest virtues are those which are most useful to other persons.

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Aristotel

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Introduction to Ethical Thinking

Subjective relativism

Social contract theory

Cultural relativism

Virtue ethics

Kantianism

Act utilitarianism

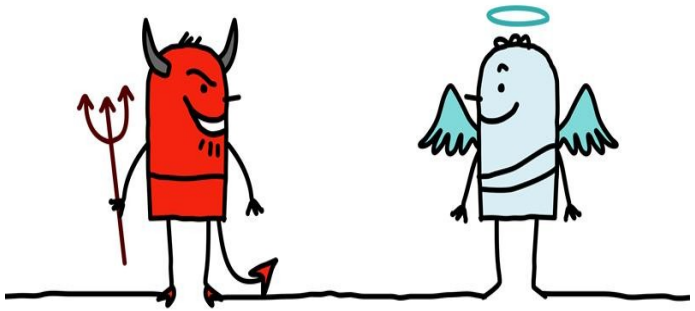
Rule utilitarianism

Divine command theory

Relativism and Subjective Relativism

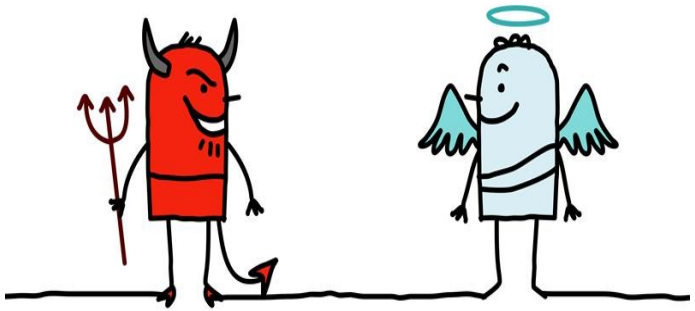
- Ethical relativism
  - No universal standards of right and wrong
  - One person can say “X is right,” another can say “X is wrong,” and both can be correct

- Subjective relativism
  - Each person decides right and wrong for himself or herself
  - “What’s right for you may not be right for me”



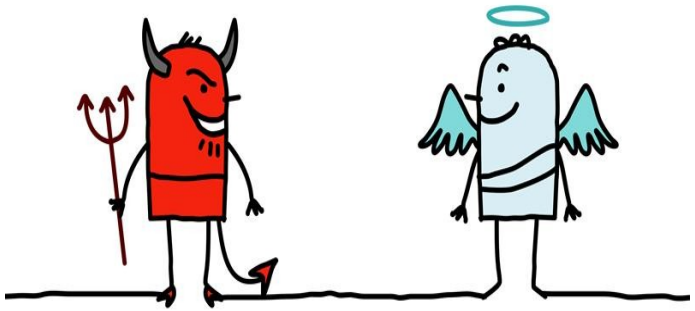
Case for Subjective Relativism

- Well-meaning and intelligent people disagree on moral issues
- Ethical debates are disagreeable and pointless
- Blurs line between doing what you think is right and doing what you feel like doing
- Makes no moral distinction between the actions of different people
- Subjective relativism and tolerance are two different things
- Decisions may not be based on reason
- Conclusion: Not a workable ethical theory



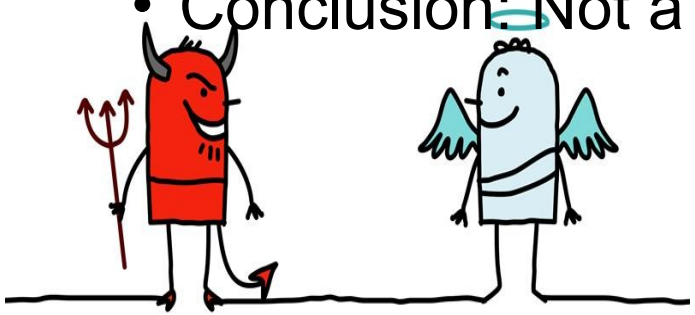
Cultural Relativism

- 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 another society or at another time
- Different social contexts demand different moral guidelines
- It is arrogant for one society to judge another



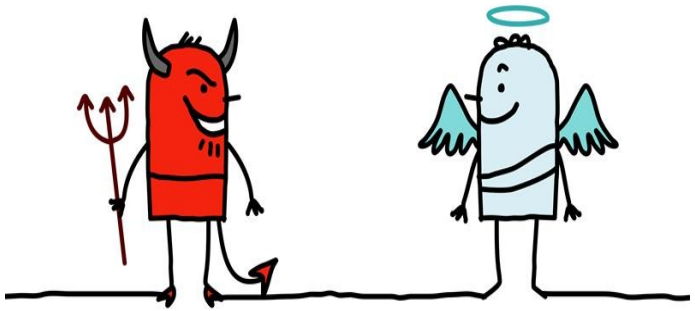
Case Against Cultural Relativism

- 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
- Conclusion: Not a workable ethical theory



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



Divine Command Theory in Action

- Different holy books disagree on certain teachings
- Divine command theory is impractical because society is multicultural, secular
- Some modern moral problems not directly addressed in scripture
- Based on obedience, not reason
- Conclusion: Not a workable ethical theory for our purposes

Kantianism

- 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

Categorical Imperative (1st Formulation)

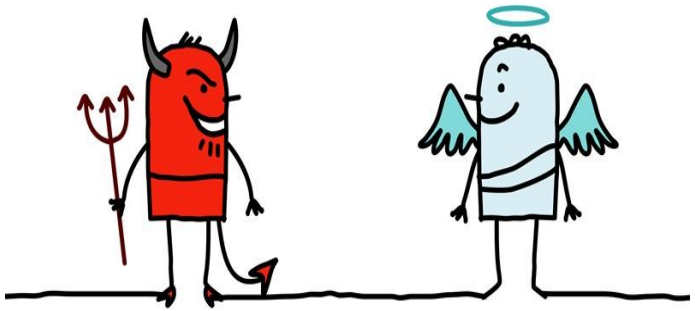
- Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws.
- Illustration of 1st Formulation
  - Question: Can a person in dire straits make a promise with the intention of breaking it later?
  - Proposed rule: “I may make promises with the intention of later breaking 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 to the question 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.
- **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

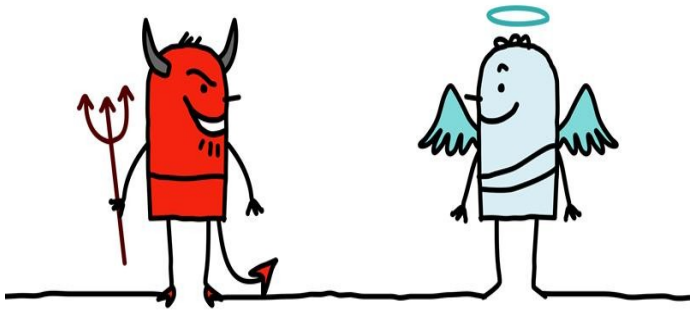


Kantian Evaluation (1st Formulation)

- 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

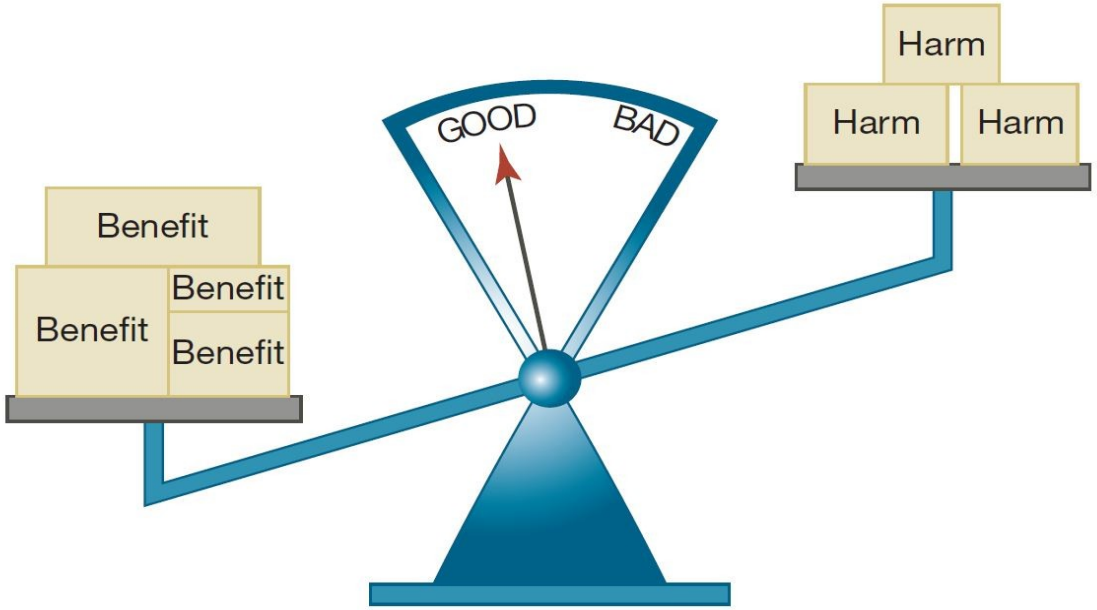
- Treats all persons as moral equals
- Gives all people moral worth as rational, autonomous beings
- Holds everyone to the same standard
- Produces universal moral guidelines

Act Utilitarianism - Principle of Utility

- 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 (Greatest Happiness Principle)

- An action is right (or wrong) to the extent that it increases (or decreases) the total happiness of the affected parties.
  - Morality of an action has nothing to do with intent
  - Focuses on the consequences
  - A consequentialist theory

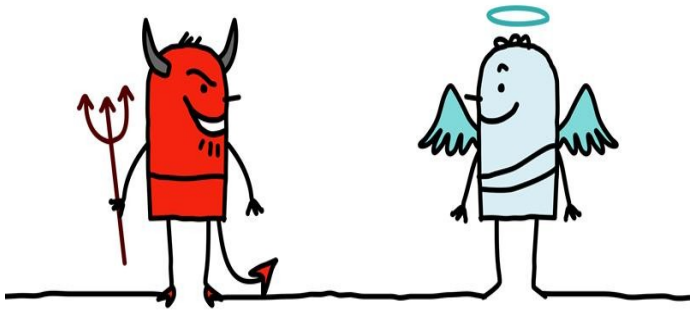


Act Utilitarianism

- 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
  - Right action to take: one that maximizes the sum

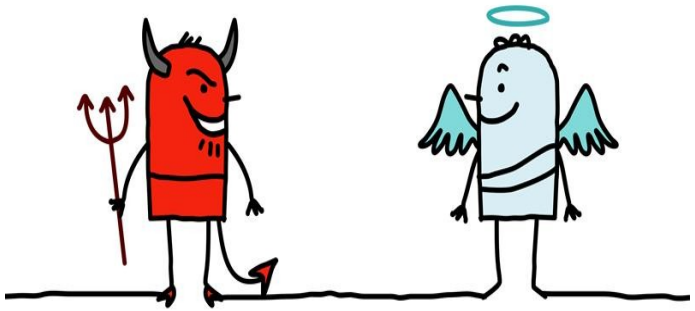
Act Utilitarianism Scenario

- 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



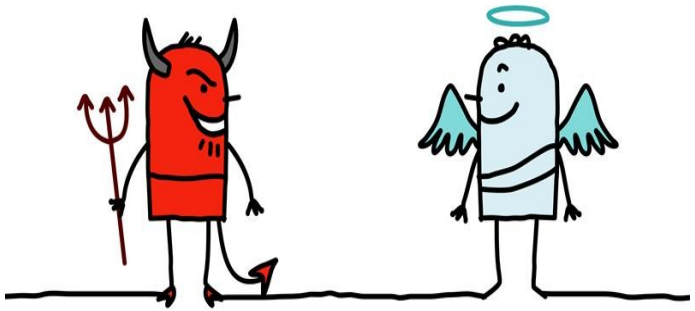
Evaluation

- 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



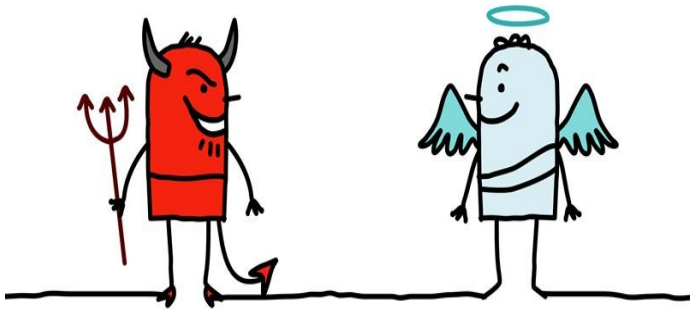
Rule Utilitarianism

- 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



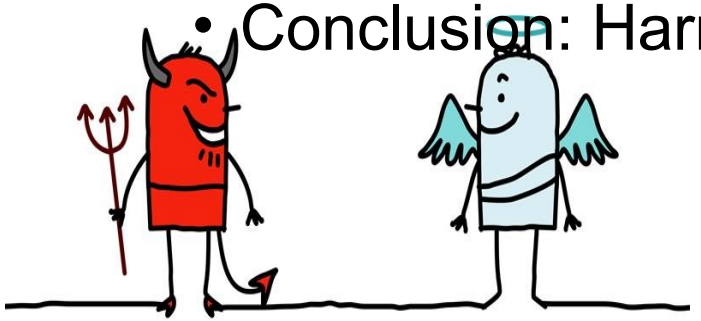
Anti-Worm Scenario

- 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



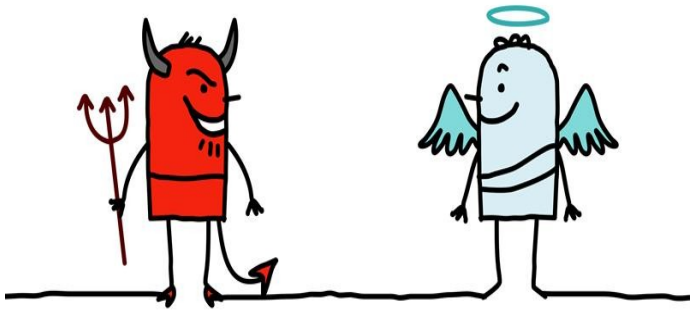
Evaluation Using Rule Utilitarianism

- 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.



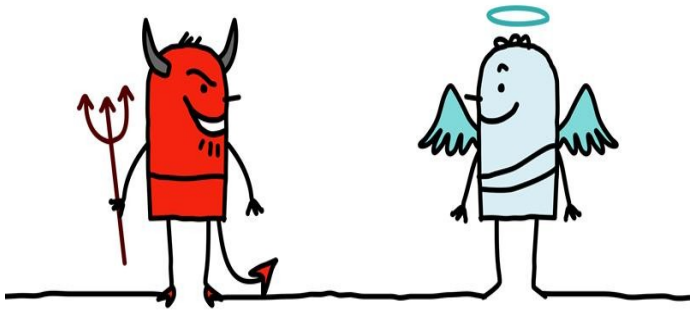
Social Contract Theory

- 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
- Jean-Jacques Rousseau
  - In ideal society, no one above rules
  - That prevents society from enacting bad rules

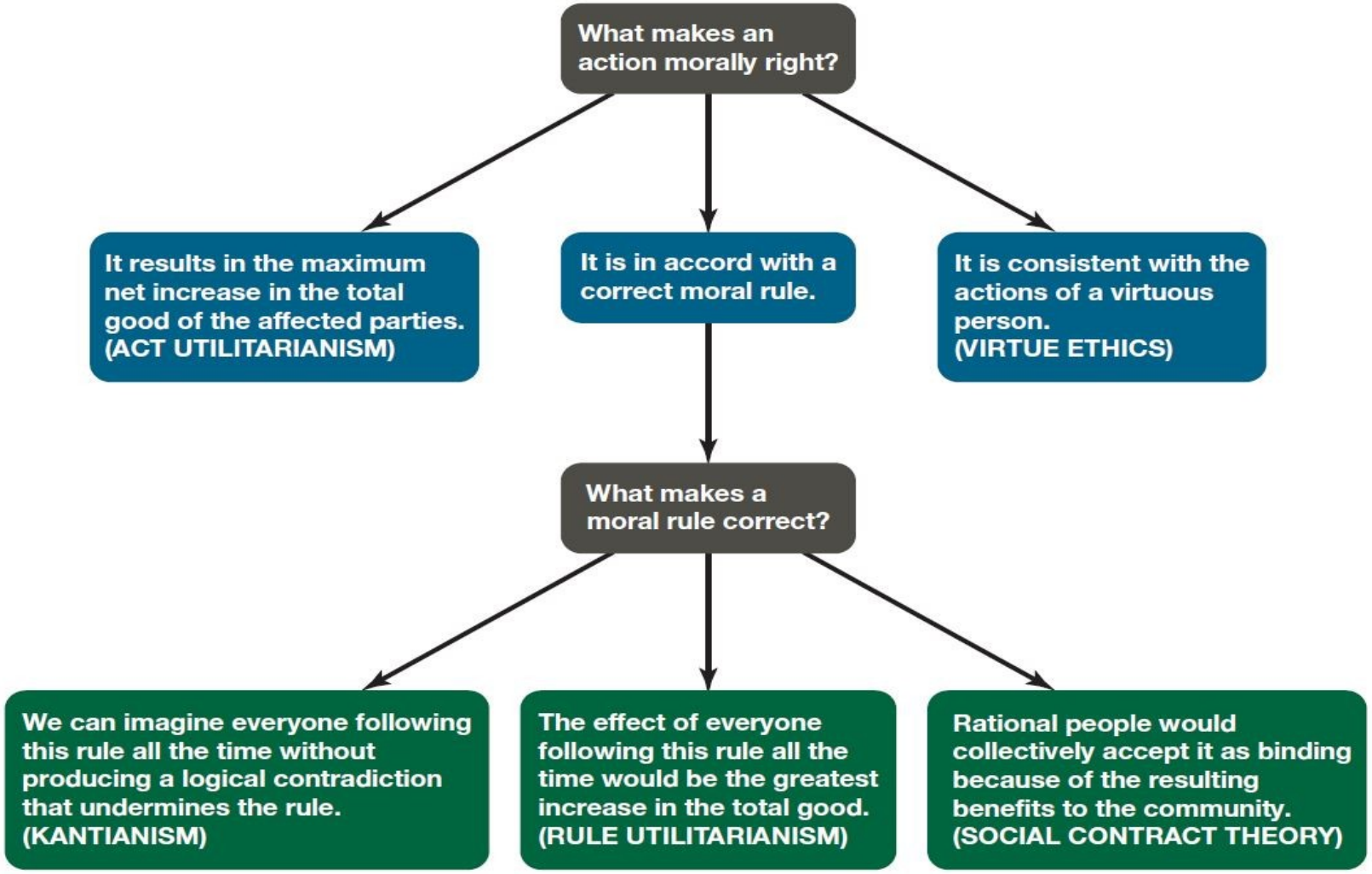


Workable Ethical Theories

- 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

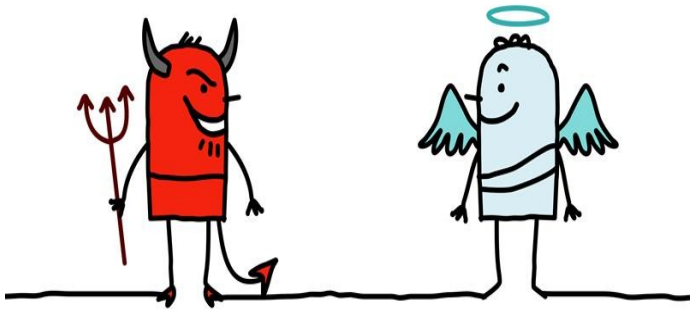


Comparing Workable Ethical Theories



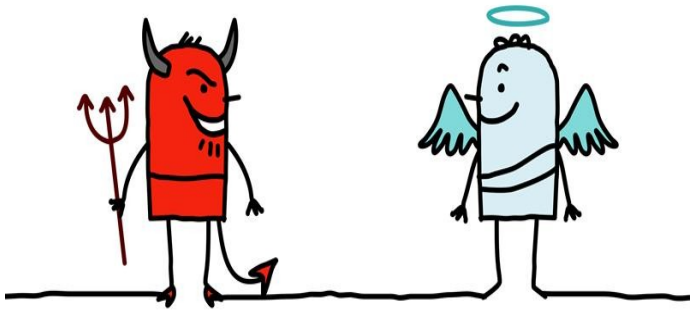
Summary:
Insights Offered by Various Theories

- 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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Scenario - Discussion

You are the senior software engineer at a start-up company developing an exciting new mobile app that will allow salespeople to generate and email sales quotes and customer invoices from their smartphones. You were given stock options when you joined the company, and if it has a successful initial public offering of stock, you will be able to sell these options for at least $10 million.

Your company's sales force has led a major corporation to believe your product will be available next week.

Unfortunately, at this point the software still contains quite a few bugs. The leader of the testing group has reported that all of the known bugs appear to be minor, but it will take another month of testing for his team to be condent the product contains no catastrophic errors.

Because of the fierce competition in the mobile app industry, it is critical that your company be “first to market." To the best of your knowledge, a well-established company will release a similar product in a few weeks. If its product appears first, your start-up company will probably go out of business.

Discussion

Consider at least three possible actions, and for each of them, answer the following questions:

- What are the most likely benefits and harms that will result from this action?
- Do you have any obligations to people who may be negatively affected by your action?
- Does this action require you to be dishonest, deceitful, or unfair to others?