

# Aspetos Socio Profissionais da Informática (Informatics and Society)

## A Short Introduction to Ethical Theories

Departamento de Informática da  
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# 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")

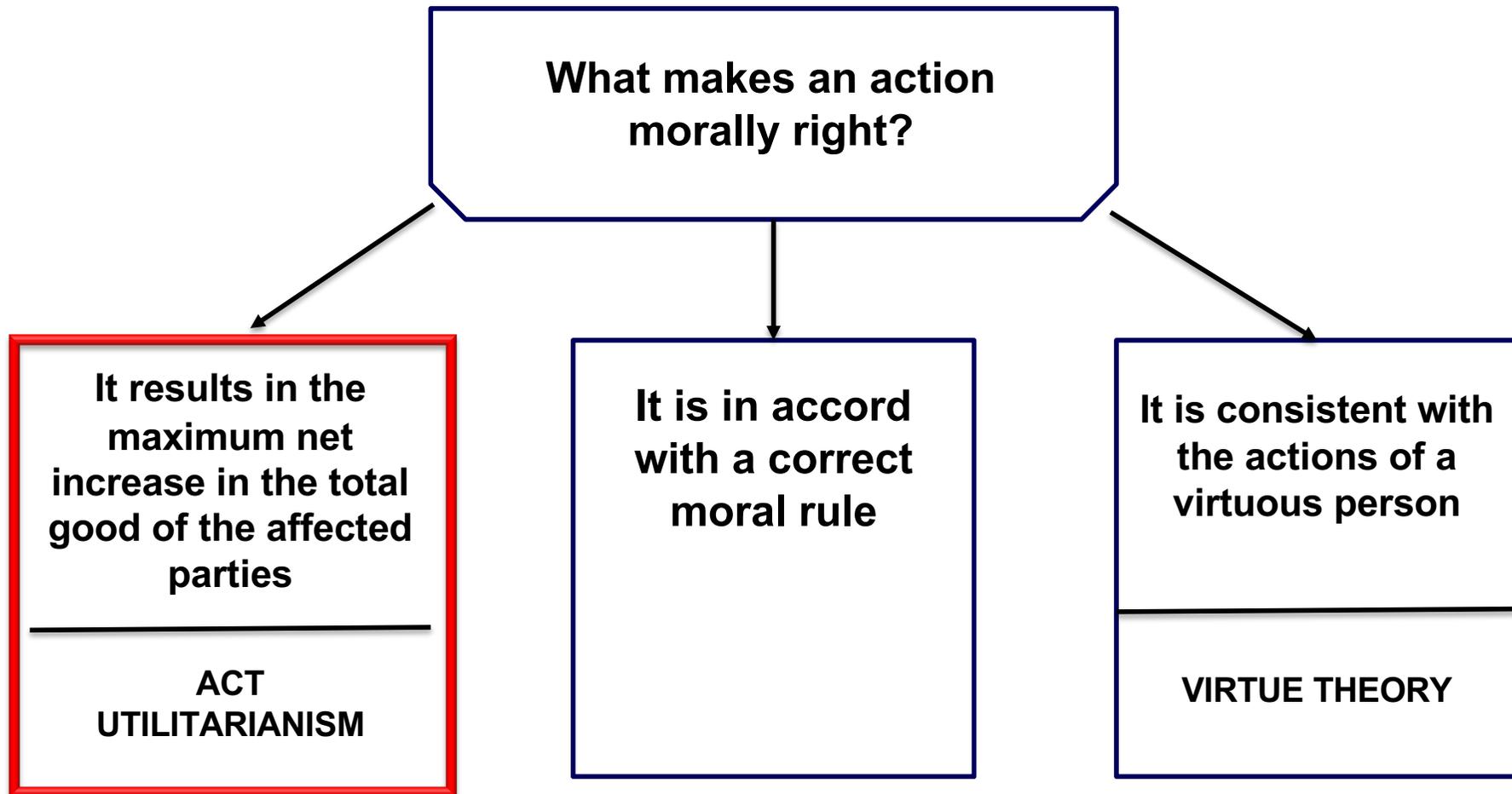
Warning: we are mostly dealing with Western Ethical Theories and ignoring Chinese and Indian Theories ....

# Workable Ethical Theories

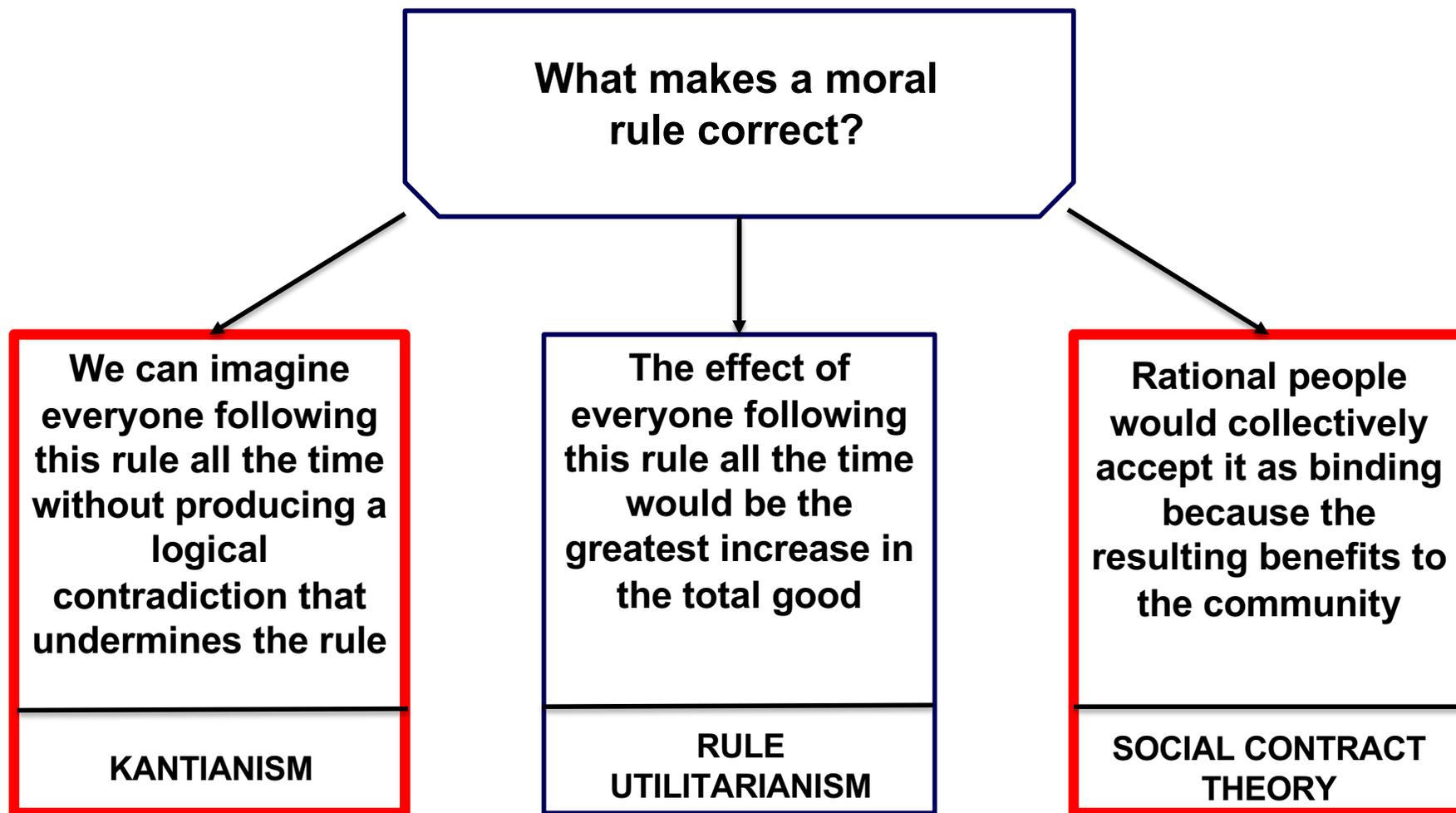
Something is good if:

- 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

# 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**

# 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

# Categorical Imperative (1st Formulation)

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

# 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 (1<sup>st</sup> 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 indicators 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 (2<sup>nd</sup> 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

# Perfect and Imperfect Duties

- Perfect duty: duty obliged to fulfil without exception
  - Example: Telling the truth
- Imperfect duty: duty obliged to fulfil 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
- Despite weaknesses, a workable ethical theory

## 2.7 Act Utilitarianism

# Principle of Utility

- Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
- 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
- Sum  $> 0$ , action is good
- Sum  $< 0$ , action is bad

- Right action to take: one that maximizes the sum

# Bentham: Weighing 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

## 2.9 Social Contract Theory

# Basis of Social Contract Theory

- Thomas Hobbes
  - In a “state of nature” our lives would be “solitary, in penury, 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

# 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."

# Kinds of Rights

- Negative right: A right that another can guarantee by leaving you alone
- Positive right: A right obligating others to do something on your behalf
- Absolute right: A right guaranteed without exception
- Limited right: A right that may be restricted based on the circumstances

# 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

- Each person may claim a “fully adequate” number of basic rights and liberties, so as 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)

# Examples in Practice

- My parents wealth should not restrict my opportunities in society
- Income-based taxes (e.g. IRS) should be higher for those who earns the most

# DVD Rental Scenario

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"

Bill can be named .... ?

# 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
- Explains why people act in self-interest in absence of common agreement
- Provides clear analysis of certain citizen/  
government problems
  - Why okay for government to deprive criminals of certain rights
  - Why civil obedience can be morally right action
- Workable ethical theory

# Case Against Social Contract Theory

- No one signed social contract
- Some actions have multiple characterizations
- Conflicting rights problem
- May unjustly treat people incapable of upholding contract
- Despite weaknesses, a workable theory

# 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

## 2.12 Morality of Breaking the Law

# Social Contract: A Prima Facie 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

# 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

# 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

# Kantian Perspective

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- Imagine rule: "I may break a law I believe to be unjust"
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# Summary and Conclusions

# 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.
- Utilitarianism: You should consider and evaluate 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 (and several others ....)

# Ethics 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?

However, law and regulations go behind the strictly personal sphere