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 hourselves

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 philosofical 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")

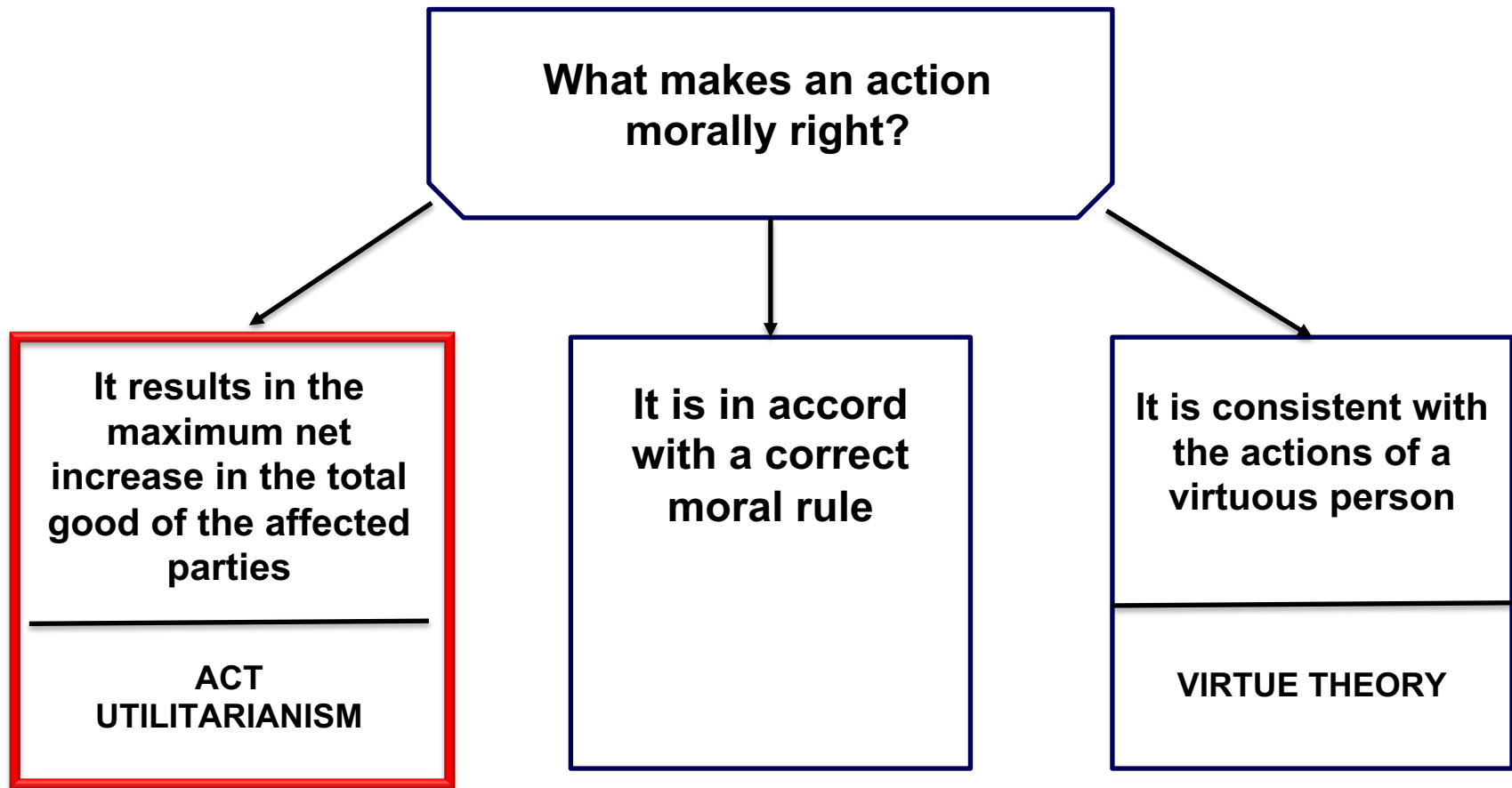- Ethical Egoism ("Everyone maximizes is gain")

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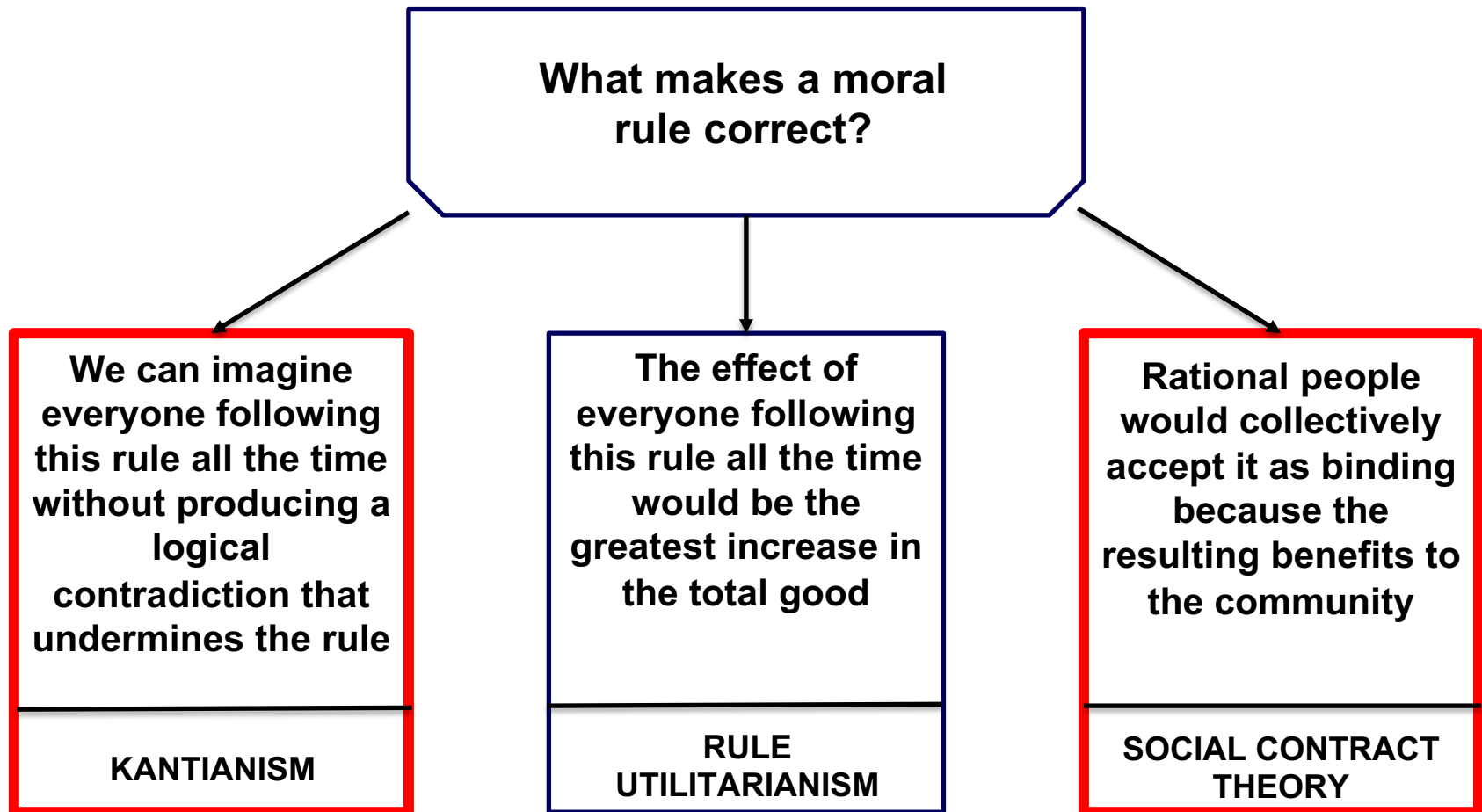
Workable Ethical Theories

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

What makes an action morally right?

It results in the maximum net increase in the total good of the affected parties

ACT UTILITARIANISM

It is in accord with a correct moral rule

It is consistent with the actions of a virtuous person

VIRTUE THEORY

Moral Rule Workable Ethical Theories

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	The effect of everyone following this rule all the time would be the greatest increase in the total good	Rational people would collectively accept it as binding because the resulting benefits to the community
KANTIANISM	**RULE UTILITARIANISM**	**SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY**

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 <u>categorial imperative</u> is an unconditional rule: a rule that always applies, regardless of the cirscuntancies

• Only a categorial imperative may be a moral rule

E. Kant Moral Rules

- Moral actions follow from the right moral principles

- How do we now 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 $\rightarrow$ 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
  - Sum > 0, action is good
  - 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"

2.9 Social Contract Theory

(For an extended article see:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_contract)

Basis of Social Contract Theory

- Thomas Hobbes (Séc. XVII)
  - 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 (Séc. XVIII)
  - In ideal society, no one above rules
  - That prevents society from enacting bad rules

- But this theory goes back to the Greek phylosophers

Basis of Social Contract Theory

- In a "state of nature" our lives would be "solitary, in penury, nasty, brutish, and short"

- We would live perpetually in a state of fear of being attacked

- We *implicitly* accept a social contract and a government to impose it

- We, therefore, give up of some individual liberties for our security and the common good (e.g. pay taxes)

- The different phylosophy schools differ in the way they concive the common government and its reach (nature of the common government and who and what is or not included in the contract)

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."

(and, if not, in some cases should be punished)

John Rawls's Principles of Justice (Séc. XX)

• 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

Kinds of Rights

• Positive right: A right obligating others to do something on your behalf (e.g. right to wealth treatment)

• Negative right: A right that another can guarantee by leaving you alone (e.g. privacy rights)

• Absolute right: A right guaranteed without exception (e.g. right to life)

• Limited right: A right that may be restricted based on the circumstances (e.g. to education)

Correlation between Types of Rights

- Positive rights tend to be more limited

- Negative rights tends to be more absolute

- Modern vision of individual rights: UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights
  - It defines several rights of all citizens (including foreigners) that all States must respect or implement

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1)

- Articles 1–2 establish the basic concepts of dignity, liberty, and equality.

- Articles 3–5 establish other individual rights, such as the right to life and the prohibition of slavery and torture.

- Articles 6–11 refer to the fundamental legality of human rights with specific remedies cited for their defence when violated.

- Articles 12–17 set forth the rights of the individual towards the community, including privacy, freedom of movement and residence within each state, the right of property and the right to a nationality.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights (2)

- Articles 18–21 sanction the so-called "constitutional liberties" and spiritual, public, and political freedoms, such as freedom of thought, opinion, expression, religion and conscience, word, peaceful association of the individual, and receiving and imparting information and ideas through any media.

- Articles 22–27 sanction an individual's economic, social and cultural rights, including healthcare, right to a standard of living, right to education, right to choose the government and be elected, right to participate in cultural life and to copyright their works,

Article 29

1. Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

2. In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

3. …

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 catalogues; others unhappy at increase in "junk mail" and of their profile being advertised

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

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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 ….)

The Limits of Ethics

• Ethics doesn't always show the right answer to moral problems.

• Indeed more and more people think that for many ethical issues there isn't a single right answer - just a set of principles that can be applied to particular cases to give those involved some clear choices.

• Some philosophers go further and say that all ethics can do is eliminate confusion and clarify the issues. After that it's up to each individual to come to their own conclusions.

Ethics can give several answers

• Many people want there to be a single right answer to ethical questions. They find moral ambiguity hard to live with because they genuinely want to do the 'right' thing, and even if they can't work out what that right thing is, they like the idea that 'somewhere' there is one right answer.

• But often there isn't one right answer - there may be several right answers, or just some least worst answers - and the individual must choose between them.

• For others moral ambiguity is difficult because it forces them to take responsibility for their own choices and actions, rather than falling back on convenient rules and customs.

Conclusions and Decisions

• Modern thinkers often teach that ethics leads people not to conclusions but to 'decisions'.

• In this view, the role of ethics is limited to clarifying 'what's at stake' in particular ethical problems.

• Philosophy can help identify the range of ethical methods, conversations and value systems that can be applied to a particular problem. But after these things have been made clear, each person must make their own individual decision as to what to do, and then react appropriately to the consequences.

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