

# ETHICAL THEORIES

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**CLASS 4**

**FALL 2015 / SECTION 02 / HOLLY BUCK**

*adapted from slides by Dr. Cynthia Matusek*

# TODAY'S CLASS

- Turn in:
  - Reading Journal 2 (Baase 1.4)
- Short introductory lecture
- In teams: ethical deliberation exercise
- If time: ethical dilemma brainstorm

# QUESTIONS...

What do we mean by...

Moral obligation?

Moral responsibility?

Morally praiseworthy?

Morally blameworthy

What are 'rights'?

Morality vs. ethics:

When is something immoral?

When is something amoral?

Is there such a thing as absolute morality?

# WHAT IS ETHICS?

A branch of philosophy (aka “moral philosophy”)

The study of right and wrong action

Descriptive (or comparative) ethics:

How do people think about these issues? What are the laws? What are the cultural norms?

Prescriptive ethics:

How should one act? What should the laws and norms be? What is right and wrong?

# ETHICAL THEORIES ARE...

Coherent: the pieces form a unified whole

Consistent: different elements don't contradict

Comprehensive: applicable to a range of questions

Systematic: generalizable rules

Impartial: applied without prejudice

- Actually, not everyone agrees on this!
- Do you have the same moral responsibilities to your classmate and your mother?

# BRANCHES OF ETHICS

## Applied ethics

- Identifying the correct course of action for real problems.
- The focus of this class!

## Normative ethics (or just "ethics")

- What *should* people do? What should they think?

## Meta-ethics

- How do we set about answering these questions?
- What is the "good?" How are moral propositions defended?

## For philosophers, not descriptive ethics

- That is sociology.

# NORMATIVE ETHICS

## "ETHICS"

- Consequentialism/utilitarianism (consequence based)
- Deontology (duty based)
- Contractualism (contract based)
- Natural rights (rights based)
- Virtue (character based)

# CONSEQUENTIALISM

Sometimes “Utilitarianism”

Maximize the overall good:

- ‘The greatest good for the greatest number’.

Impartiality and agent-neutrality:

- Everyone's happiness counts the same.
- My good counts for no more than anyone else's good.
- My analysis of good is not me-specific.

What’s “the good?” Pleasure? Beauty? Money?

Where does this go right? Wrong?



# DEONTOLOGY

**The right is more important than the good.**

- It's about what you do, not what happens.

It is moral to follow rules, and intent is what matters.

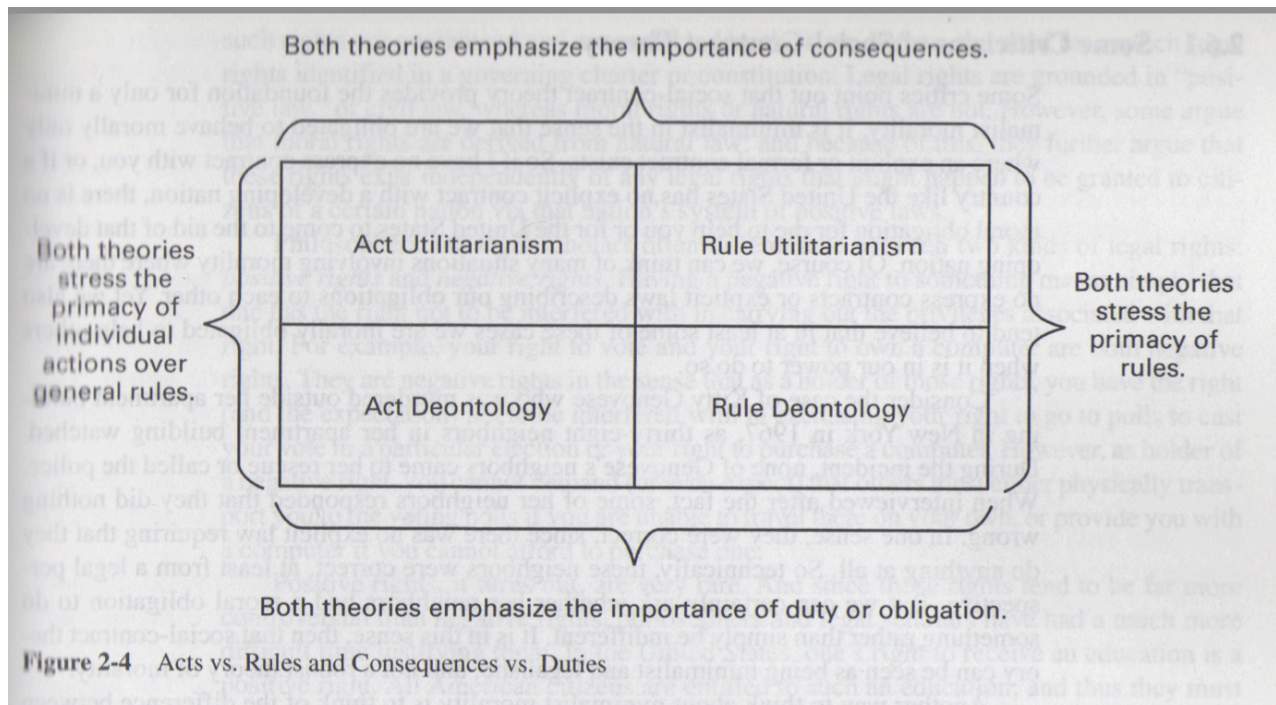
Where do rules come from:

- God
- A list of duties and obligations
- The rights of others
- The social contract of rational agents:

**Where does this go wrong?**

# ACT BASED / RULE BASED

“Rule utilitarianism: An act, X, is morally permissible if the consequences of following the general rule Y, of which act X is an instance, would bring about the greatest good for the greatest number.” (Tavani, p. 30)



# CONTRACTUALISM

## Contractualism (contract based)

- Do exactly and only those things where a rational agent would want to live in a world where everyone did those things.

## A "social contract" is a theory describing:

- The source of the power of the state; the reason we follow authority; and a mechanism for agreeing on moral concepts.

## Where does this go wrong?

## What is a rational agent?

- How is it required to help someone?
- And people are not rational agents.

You've just been appointed to the board of directors of Awesome.com. Unfortunately, the company has been experiencing some difficult financial times, resulting in revenue losses in three of the last four quarters. As you assume your new position, you discover that two proposals are on the table.

Proposal 1: All employees be retained, but an immediate wage freeze for all employees must be imposed for the next 6 months. (Employees may even be asked to take a 5% pay cut if things do not improve by then.)

Proposal 2: Wages shouldn't be frozen, but 5% of the work force should be laid off. (One piece of reasoning is that taking more drastic measures will "protect" 95% of workers and will send a message to Wall Street & local investors that Awesome.com is serious about improving its financial position.)

How would an act utilitarian, a rule utilitarian, a rule deontologist, and an act deontologist reach a solution to this dilemma?

Which solution is most plausible / realistic? Which solution is ethically "best"?

# COMING UP NEXT...

- Rights-Based
  - Natural Rights
  - Legal Rights
- Virtue-Based
- Just-Consequentialism
  
- RJ3: Tavani ch. 2, up to page 27